CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl

Michelle Superle



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Contemporary English-language Indian Children's Literature:
Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl
Michelle Superle

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl

MICHELLE SUPERLE

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Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavour to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

Foreword

When I began researching Indian children's literature in the 1980s, I noted that the production of children's books was heavily influenced by political ideology and a nationalistic agenda. Whether it was through novels, biographies, or traditional stories, the intention was to foster pride in Indian achievements, shape the attitudes and values of young readers, and empower them to triumph over obstacles in order to fulfill national and personal goals.

These aims of children's publishing have not changed, as Michelle Superle argues convincingly in *Contemporary, English-language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl*. She examines over one hundred English-language novels by Indian authors, published between 1988 and 2008, through the perspectives of postcolonial and feminist criticism. Labeling the novels set in India as "aspirational literature with a transformative agenda" (6), she does an excellent job of showing that they reflect a hegemonic—instead of a democratic—power structure that marginalizes large segments of the population and homogenizes the rich diversity of India. In addition, she finds this literature to be unrealistic and prescriptive, because it shields children from harsh social realities and gives them overly simplistic solutions to complex problems.

A major contribution of this work is its sustained examination of children's and young adult novels by diaspora Indians. I am happy to note that my challenge to Indian authors, in the article "Break Your Silence: A Call to Asian Indian Children's Writers" (1993), was taken up and that novels about second-generation Indians—mainly in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have increased dramatically in the past decade. The main themes identified by Superle are racial discrimination, reconciling parents' traditional beliefs with Western norms, preserving cultural identity, and interracial relationships. She sees aspirational tendencies in diaspora novels as well, because multicultural harmony and a bicultural identity are achieved either through assimilation, exoticizing Indianness, or as a result of a journey to India.

This well-researched study is a welcome addition to the scholarship on Indian children's literature. It will no doubt stimulate further debate and

theoretical examination of books for Indian children. It will raise questions such as: What constitutes the Indian nation? Can authors reconcile sociological and aesthetic aims? Which authors represent India authentically? Because this study is limited to authors with at least one Indian parent, India's most prolific and popular children's author, Ruskin Bond, who has been writing for English-speaking readers for nearly sixty years, could not be included. Perhaps one could question how an author of Anglo-Indian ancestry can successfully transcend the didactic agenda in order to capture the rich and varied experiences of Indians.

Contemporary, English-language Indian Children's Literature will prove to be a foundational text for researchers of postcolonial Indian children's literature. Hopefully, it will also lead future writers to engage more meaningfully with the complex realities of poverty, caste and class divisions, gender issues, and religious strife.

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September 30, 2010

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In India, my research was aided and assisted by authors and scholars too numerous to name. However, special thanks must be extended to a crucial few: Deepa Agarwal, Paro Anand, Rimli Bhattacharya, Arundhati Deosthale, Santhini Govindan, Manorama Jafa, Manju Jaidka, Navin Menon, Devika Rangachari, Nilima Sinha, Pushpinder Syal, and Coomi Vevaina. Above all, the hands-on guidance of Dr Anto Thomas Chakramakkil, founder of the Children's Literature Association of India, was of inestimable value.

Introduction

Contemporary English-language Indian Children's Novels as Aspirational Literature

> And this got me thinking on what it could take to improve all the things that I saw as the real issues in India—the lack of clean drinking water and basic facilities for the poor, the street children with no education, the ever-escalating pollution . . . and wondered how I could fix it all.
>
> The laundry list of problems made my head swim a bit, but I felt confident that if I thought hard enough, a solution would strike me. And it did. . . .
> I am confident that this is going to be miraculous, it is going to be transformational, and it is going to be possible. This is the sentiment I struggled to capture as I wrote.
>
> (**Khanna 58–60.** *The Year I Turned 16.* **2006.**)

> Gwyn appeared the very image of the American Dream itself, the blonde-rooted, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Marilyn for the skinny generation. And if I was her reverse twin—the negative to her positive—that made me? The Indian nightmare? The American scream?
>
> She'd told him I was the *Indian* girl. *The* Indian girl. Somehow neither description rang completely true to me in terms of how I felt inside, but the thing was I'd never really consciously thought of myself as American, either.
>
> (**Hidier 11.** *Born Confused.* **2002.**)

An extensive critical analysis of contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels is overdue. Although this body of literature has developed only recently and the output is small, according to postcolonial critic Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, contemporary children's fiction showcases significant Indian

social trends "worth noting because they signal change, or the desire for change, in the situation of and attitudes towards children" ("Fictions of Difference" 101). As one of the world's most populous countries, one from which millions emigrate to the English-speaking west, and one which could be poised as a new global superpower, India merits close consideration. As a window into shifting value systems, children's literature from India and the Indian diaspora is useful for its capacity to provide insight into contemporary Indian social situations, both national and transnational. According to economist Rama Bijapurkar, these social situations are of particular interest because "the child of today's India has no parallel elsewhere. This child represents a poor country's Internet generation, its aspirations running riot in a milieu of very scarce opportunities: a situation that has not existed anywhere else, ever before" (9). Despite the scarcity of opportunities in reality, fictional Indian children are portrayed as succeeding in shaping their lives, communities, and nations.

To provide a broad canvas of representations, I have collected for examination a body of 101 English-language children's novels that portray Indian childhood. These texts were written by Indian authors living in India, the United Kingdom, and North America, between 1988 and 2008, and published for readers aged eight through eighteen.[1] Through the lenses of postcolonial and feminist theory, I compare children's novels from the Indian diaspora in the west[2] with English-language children's novels published in India to examine current textual constructions of Indian childhood across a wide range of texts.

Clearly, the parameters of this examination have of necessity been drawn tightly. Every study must be honed to manageable proportions, and achieving this often involves a combination of academic imperative and pragmatism. For example, in this study I do not examine, refer to, or compare the body of texts under consideration to any works of Indian children's literature in any languages used in India other than English. The reason for this is practical: English is the only Indian language I understand. Equally practical is my decision to exclude works published before 1988,[3] as the majority of these are out of print and very difficult to source. Similarly, the challenge of sourcing texts published in India has resulted in a corpus that does not necessarily reflect every novel published in the period, but rather those to which I have been able to gain access on my two research trips to India, through online book retailers, or during my research fellowship at the International Youth Library. I have also excluded poetry, folklore, picture books, easy readers, and short stories in favour of novels, which offer attractive scope and breadth well-suited to my analysis.

Most of the novels I discuss are examples of what Joseph Zornado calls "innocent"-seeming texts in his examination of ideology and childhood, *Inventing the Child* (2001). Zornado argues that children's stories are not innocent: "rather, their innocence is an ideological projection" (3). Considering these contemporary, English-language children's novels as powerful vehicles

of ideology, then, I examine them not as the simple, innocent entertainment they may seem to be, but rather as examples of the way "a culture envisions itself," as Zornado suggests readers might view children's literature (3). Children's literature critic John Stephens similarly argues in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992) that "fiction must be regarded as a special site for ideological effect, with a potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes" and that writing "for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience" (3). This is certainly the approach of most of the novels I examine here, which therefore offer insights into current attitudes towards children's involvement in shaping nation, culture, and gender: Indian authors imagine optimistic versions of the Indian nation, Indian bicultural identity, and Indian girlhood in their novels for children.

Aspirations to Transform

Several scholars have drawn attention not only to the capacity of print media to shape imagined social and political constructs, such as the nation, but also to the novel form's specific role in this activity. For example, Benedict Anderson developed the theory that a nation can be considered "an imagined political community" (5). He argues that although most members of a nation will never meet, the nation exists "in the minds of each" as "the image of their communion" and thus is imagined (6). It is a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Print media provides the infrastructure which allows such imagined communities to develop (46). Anderson draws attention to the ideological power of an imagined structure such as the nation, and I begin from this position. I also discuss bicultural identity and girlhood as imagined concepts.

Building upon Anderson's ideas, literary critic Timothy Brennan argues that nations "are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" and recognises the historical rise of nationalism in Europe with the simultaneous growth of the novel form (49). Although there are undoubtedly significant technical differences between novels produced for adults and those for children, it is still fruitful to consider this basic thesis. I argue that the Indian children's novels in this sample similarly function to create an imaginary nation, in this case one that is or can be made ideal when child characters act to shape it according to a hegemonic value system. The novel is so powerful in this political enterprise because its scope has the capacity to contain the "'one, yet many' of national life" which mimics "the structure of the nation" and allows "people to imagine the special community" of the

nation (Brennan 49). This idea is particularly relevant to the political concept of "unity in diversity," which is central in Indian children's literature.

Although the role of the novel as Brennan discusses it may sound democratic and empowering, he also identifies a paradox that has direct relevance to the Indian children's novels I discuss. While not discussing India specifically, Brennan recognises that "under conditions of illiteracy and shortages, and given simply the leisure time necessary for reading one, the novel has been an elitist and minority form in developing countries" in comparison to other literary forms; further, the novel is a form through which a highly educated elite communicates to largely urban audiences making it, ironically, "a naturally cosmopolitan form that empire has allowed to play a national role" (56). This paradox raises a crucial question in relation to Indian children's novels: who is expected to create the nation? As I will discuss, the answer in relation to the novels in this sample is primarily urban, middle-class children, a situation related to conditions of composition and distribution (see Chapter 1). This uneven representation extends to the diaspora, and it also affects such questions as: who can successfully navigate bicultural identity? Which girls can achieve gender equality? It is primarily middle-class child characters who succeed in achieving these goals, which are positioned textually as positive outcomes.

In fact, positive outcomes are the overarching norm in these children's novels, which comprise an aspirational literature with a transformative agenda. They imagine apparently empowered child characters who perform in diverse ways in the process of successfully creating and shaping the ideal Indian nation, their own well-adjusted bicultural identities, and/or their own empowered girlhoods. These novels may appear harmlessly idealistic, especially in their capacity to offer the hope that it is possible to improve upon current reality. Yet at times their optimistic outlook can also be regarded as problematic, particularly as it frequently involves a tendency to oversimplify and/or homogenise. While this tendency exists in much children's literature, often taking the form of an over-reliance on binary opposites (as seen in the epigraph from *Born Confused*, for instance), in some of the Indian children's novels its results can manifest variously as, for example, a version of Indian girlhood that may be overly reliant on western liberal feminism, a narrow, hegemonic version of the Indian nation, and essentialised, stereotyped, or exoticised versions of "Indianness."

Before I further develop these ideas, a note on terminology is necessary, as already several potentially contentious terms have been employed. Each of the terms that I define here and throughout this discussion is the subject of extensive theoretical debate. Although I have engaged with these debates and have tried to reflect this in my analyses and usage, here I intend simply to establish a clear, comprehensible lexicon with which to discuss the corpus that makes up my sample.

First among these terms are "India," "Indian," and "diaspora." From the wide range of potential terms that could be used to discuss the literature

and authors in this study, it seems sensible to choose those which can be employed consistently. This is not, however, an easy decision, as many factors must be considered. For example Dimple, the adolescent protagonist of *Born Confused* (2002) by Tanuja Desai Hidier, discovers the complexity of this terminology when she attends a conference on identity politics in the United States (where she was born) and learns that identifying herself as Indian may be much more complicated than she had previously realised. She must also consider other terminology:

> "people of color"—that was fired out there a ton as well. At first I thought they meant black people but then . . . I realised [it] meant we, as in us. I'd never thought of myself as a people of color. . . . And everyone, I mean everyone, said South Asian. (Hidier 293)

Although Dimple continues to refer to herself as Indian, other frequently used terms in her country include "Indian-American," "*desi*,"[4] and "South Asian American." In Canada the terms "Indo-Canadian," "South Asian," and "South Asian Canadian" are regularly employed. In the United Kingdom the term "Asian" is often used to refer to people of Indian birth or descent, which is particularly confusing for North Americans. There are complicated political motivations underpinning each of these terms, and there is no consensus of terminology, as will be apparent when I quote from the work of other critics in the field. Yet in a literary examination such as this one, consistency makes for streamlined reading.

Therefore, because my discussion focuses on India specifically rather than South Asia more broadly, I use the terms "India" and "Indian." By "India," I mean the political boundaries of the Indian nation-state as it was formed in 1947, after it gained independence from the British. I refer to "Indians" as those who currently or originally live/d in India and who are ethnically Indian through at least one parent (thus excluding from this discussion authors such as the Anglo-descent children's writer from India, Ruskin Bond). When I discuss "diasporic Indian children's literature," I am referring to writers who themselves, or whose parents, emigrated from India to the United Kingdom, the United States, or Canada, and who are ethnically Indian through at least one parent. These particular western, English-speaking countries have significant Indian populations, which may explain why they publish the majority of diasporic Indian children's literature. When I discuss the "bicultural identity" of diasporic characters, I am referring to their sense of themselves as simultaneously Indian, British, American, or Canadian, depending on where they live (see Chapter 6).

On a broader level, when I refer to scholarly discussions of "South Asian children's literature," I am employing a blanket term that includes any scholarly work published in English in India, the United Kingdom, or North America which discusses any genre of literature for children aged birth through

eighteen, in any language, about or published in any of these countries and/or any of the other nations that collectively constitute South Asia.[5]

When I discuss the Indian "nation," I am again referring to India as it was formed in 1947: a secular, democratic country that united a wide variety of pre-existing states and kingdoms, and which now borders a vast geographic space and constitutionally extends equal rights and opportunities to every citizen regardless of gender, religion, language, region, or caste. Whereas this sounds straightforward, there are many complex nuances at play here, as well as vigorous debates about the nation ongoing in India, and it is necessary to contextualise this definition with an explanation of several key ideas, particularly the nuances of secularism in India. I provide this information at the beginning of Chapter 4. In regards to the Indian nation, I employ the term "nationalism" to indicate patriotic devotion to a country, in this case India, particularly in aspirations for national advancement. With this in mind, it is important to note that although current discussions of nationalism tend to view this stance as problematic, I employ the term in description rather than judgment. However, such simple, denotative definitions of nation and nationalism are complicated by an idea put forward by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who suggested in 1946 that the concept of a nation is formed by a country's citizens: "Nationalism is essentially a group memory of past achievements, traditions and experiences" (627 qtd. in Gore 70). This idea both anticipates Anderson's theory of the nation as an imagined community and foreshadows the complexity of my discussion of Indian nationalism as it is imagined in the children's novels published in India.

Both the Indian nation and the texts in this sample are underpinned by an ideological stance of liberalism, a political belief system informed by the principle that all humans are free and equal individuals. This ideology radically differs from some traditional Indian belief systems, for instance those informed by Hinduism. Nevertheless, liberalism shapes the Indian constitution and seems also to comprise the political position of the authors in this corpus. It emphasises the rights of each individual and insists on equal opportunity for all—particularly that all individuals are equally deserving of freedom of thought and speech. Liberalism, as I use it, places individualism, self-determination, freedom of choice (for example in religious practice, sexual orientation, marriage partner, and career), and universal access to education as central values. Social anthropologist M. S. Gore's comment on the role of liberal political philosophy in India in *Unity in Diversity: The Indian Experience in Nation-Building* (2002), foreshadows my later discussion of the nation as it is imagined in these novels:

> If India chose to adopt the western liberal framework of the nation-state, it was not wholly because of the imitative tendencies of its middle class political leadership. It was the model that offered the hope of encompassing and reconciling India's social and cultural diversity. (109)

These are the first and most frequently used of many terms that require attention in this discussion. I provide additional clarification as the need arises.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their political underpinnings, contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels generally imagine empowered fictional child characters who deploy their power according to the principles of liberalism in varying situations, in order to shape their nation, their bicultural identities, and their girl selves in idealised, sometimes almost utopian, ways. In this sense, the texts are aspirational: they imagine child characters filled with strong ambitions who succeed in meeting their goals. An example of such hopeful aspiration is clear in the epigraph from *The Year I Turned 16* (2006) by Deeptha Khanna. In response to an assignment from her teacher, fifteen-year-old Vineeta is determined to find a solution to India's multitude of challenges, and she does. As Vineeta's observations illustrate, many serious problems require attention in her country. The positive way she promotes the solution she devises (mandatory national service whereby educated Indians would aid their less fortunate compatriots) is both admirable and misguided. Vineeta develops an oversimplified fictional solution to the social and economic challenges that threaten India's prosperity, and with so many seemingly insurmountable problems to face, it is perhaps understandable that she, like many Indian children's authors, would want to imagine hopeful scenarios which improve upon reality.

As the prompting of Vineeta's teacher demonstrates, it is adults who intentionally place children in the role of problem solvers. Adults both position children as the hope for the future in many real societies, and, as children's authors, imagine child characters whose status as children automatically grants them a kind of power. This belief system is evident in many cultures but it is especially strong in the Indian children's novels. A scene from the fantasy novel *The Island of Infinity: Marina's Dream* (2005) by Anuradha Majumdar, effectively demonstrates this positioning of the child when eleven-year-old Marina is told by a respected elder that she must play an integral role in a scenario of international intrigue. Marina asks, "Why do you say *my* quest? I never asked for it and I'm not even a grown-up," and her mentor responds, "Because you can dream it, Marina! Most grownups don't have a heart that's strong enough" (73). Even this brief exchange sets the stage for the role child characters play in the novels. Indubitably this positioning of child characters is related to genre conventions generally associated with children's literature, as I will discuss shortly. However, it is also indicative of the specific way Indian children are fictionally positioned in contemporary Indian novels for children, assigned by adults the role of powerful dreamers who can change the world for the better.

With an optimistic approach similar to Vineeta's, many Indian children's authors imagine a multitude of improvements upon reality, all of which position child characters as powerful agents of transformation. For example, in reality the Tibetan Panchen Lama was abducted by the Chinese government

in 1995 and has not been seen since. However in *Ladakh Adventure* (2000) by Deepak Dalal, the Indian "school boys" Vikram and Aditya rescue an abducted Tibetan child lama from kidnappers in the Indian Himalayas. In reality staggering numbers of people die worldwide from cancer annually, but in *The Hunt for the Miracle Herb* (1995) by Deepa Agarwal, three Indian children discover an herb in the Himalayas that can cure cancer. This adventure story subtly positions India as a valuable source of humanitarian aid and as both an environmental and financial wellspring. *The Hunt for the Miracle Herb* also highlights the fragility of the environment, as does *Born to Lead* (1994) by Paro Anand, in which a talking tiger cub and a human boy cooperate to succeed in protecting an area of jungle and its animal inhabitants. In reality, though, tigers are an endangered species with ongoing poaching threatening their population stability, even in Indian wildlife sanctuaries.

Unquestionably the aspirations and hopeful imagined solutions in many Indian children's novels are far from realistic. In actuality, the idealistic solutions they imagine are unlikely to transpire with the ease with which they are shown to unfold textually. In fact, the Indian situation is even more troubled than Vineeta recognises in *The Year I Turned 16*. Gore succinctly outlines several other conflicts that combine to cause political unrest in India:

> We have had communal riots and a hardening of religion-based affiliation among some of the minorities. We have had riots based on the rights of backward castes to protection and reservations. We have troubled campuses, fragmented workers' movements, disgruntled and increasingly militant farmers' lobbies, a worsening law and order situation in the metropolitan cities and the far-off zamindari area. To top it all we are witnessing a spectrum of secessionist terrorism. (17)

Such complicated political situations are rarely delineated within the novels. On the contrary, most are characterised by a relentlessly idealistic optimism in the certainty of improving social situations, a tendency that also manifests in relation to bicultural identity and gender. This is perhaps a result of the novels' intended audience.

Children's Literature as Hopeful and Harmful

While this is not the place to engage in extensive ongoing discussions about the construction of childhood and the various sociohistorically influenced attitudes towards childhood that permeate children's literature, it is important to point out that for a variety of reasons, simplicity and optimism have long been some of the defining features of children's literature. This tendency is apparent in both critically acclaimed and popular children's texts, such as *The Secret Garden* (1911) by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Lion, the Witch and*

the Wardrobe (1950) by C. S. Lewis, and the Harry Potter series (1997–2007) by J. K. Rowling, all of which sidestep the potential grimness and chaos of reality for clear, linear plot progression and happy endings.

In her discussion of contemporary Indian children's literature, Sunder Rajan argues that "the narrative modes available to writers of children's fiction, such as adventure or fantasy" shape narrative content "in ways other than that of stark realism" (110). What Sunder Rajan does not recognise is that many children's authors *choose* to shape their tales as fantastic or adventurous. Stark realism is equally available to them, particularly today. It is up to the adult literary critic, following Zornado's suggestion, to recognise that apparently innocent children's texts are premised upon a culturally constructed idea of childhood as apparently innocent, and that the production of such books responds not only to market demands perceived by publishers, but also to the individual decisions of authors. As well as meeting market demands and perpetuating widespread constructions of childhood, such innocence, simplicity, and optimism function effectively to mask other deep-seated cultural values embedded within the texts, and it is those that I am interested in exploring here, in the contemporary Indian context.

In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (2003), Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer describe several central tendencies of children's literature, including its reliance on binary oppositions (199), simplicity (203), and its general tone of hopefulness, optimism, and the frequent use of "happy endings" (209). Whereas there are many examples of morally complex children's texts, and it is not difficult to find counter-examples to refute these claims, these tendencies do represent general, overarching trends in much children's literature globally. These genre conventions are significant, as they provide one explanation for the widespread optimistic, aspirational position of the Indian children's novels.

In their tendency to default to optimistic endings, Indian children's authors stand apart from well-established South Asian writers who produce English-language novels for an adult audience. Many of their works have enjoyed widespread international critical attention and acclaim, as well as international sales—all of which have eluded the children's texts. Novels such as *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai each won the Booker Prize, and others, such as *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth and *A Fine Balance* (1996) by Rohinton Mistry, have been both popular bestsellers and critically acclaimed for their sophisticated, nuanced portrayals of postcolonial India. Significantly, none of these provides an optimistic outlook or narrative conclusion.

Whereas many readers will be more familiar with these widely circulated texts than with the children's novels, the story which has most recently captured the international public's attention at the time of writing is the film phenomenon, *Slumdog Millionaire*, based on the novel *Q & A* (2005) by Indian author Vikas Swarup, India's Deputy High Commissioner to South Africa.

Its wild popularity with audiences may be due to its hopeful ending: the eighteen-year-old protagonist from Mumbai's slums, orphaned as a child in a communal Hindu-Muslim riot, is propelled to wealth and happiness when he wins a fortune in a game-show contest. The narrative realistically depicts his grueling life on the streets but then promises a (relatively) easy escape. Interestingly, the story has been "criticised for its portrayal of India as a place of only desperation and misery" (Jacobson). At the same time, Swarup insists that his "book is about hope and survival," claiming that "you can triumph over adversity" (qtd. in Jacobson). Perhaps indicative of its position in the realm of popular culture, the happy ending of *Slumdog Millionaire* resembles those often present in children's literature.

As do many critics of popular culture, Nodelman and Reimer question the "accuracy and honesty" of optimistic children's books with happy endings, as well as their "lack of realism" (209). They argue that an "optimistic view," and a "well-intentioned impulse can be found everywhere in children's literature" and that these "imply a symbolic defiance of a more complicated knowledge of the constrictions of reality" (210). This can mean that "children's books tend to try to persuade children that . . . the world is in fact as idyllic as children's books suggest" (210). It is important to question the accuracy and honesty of the Bowdlerisation of life that occurs throughout many of the contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels in this sample. Whereas this "optimistic view" can encourage apparently desirable imitative behaviour, as well as provide inspiration and comfort to readers, it can also be dishonest—sometimes detrimentally so.

Nodelman and Reimer briefly examine the relationship between hopeful and utopian children's literature (210). Despite the fact that many utopian texts are far from optimistic, it is still possible to view utopian texts as a logical extension of optimism. Although there are technically no works of utopian children's literature in the corpus I examine, many of these texts do contain one component of the genre identified by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry in their analysis of utopian children's literature: texts that portray "aspirations toward ideality or amelioration are fundamentally social" and can be seen as having utopian tendencies (2). These texts, then, "encourage[e] young people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action" (7). In a similar way, the Indian novels do aspire towards ideality and, by modeling successful, empowered child characters, they do seem to invite young readers to act to create change on both the individual and societal levels—but largely within existing hegemonic structures.

Therefore, while none of the novels in this sample are technically utopian literature, some current ideas about utopian children's literature can provide a useful context for examining this corpus of children's novels. In particular, *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (2008) by Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum offers several germane points. Taking the same approach I have outlined

here, the authors first identify "contemporary children's texts" as "highly responsive to social change and to global politics, and crucially implicated in shaping the values of children and young people" (2). They then suggest that "utopian and dystopian tropes" can "carry out important social, cultural, and political work by challenging and reformulating ideas about power and identity, community, the body," and more (2). Indian children's novels do this very work. Bradford et al. develop the idea of "transformative utopianism" as "fictional imaginings of transformed world orders" that can "propose new social and political arrangements" (2–3) with the capacity to "imagine a better world than the one that readers/audiences currently know" (4). Many Indian children's novels similarly offer dramatically idealised versions of life. Although they lack fully developed utopian communities, they do offer "new and superior social arrangements" that result in an imagined "better world" based on liberal political parameters.

In this sense, the texts can be viewed as more fantastic than realistic, regardless of the fact that more than half adhere to some degree to many genre conventions typically associated with realistic fiction—and it is this half with which I am most concerned. These novels portray life as the authors seem to wish it was, rather than as it most often is, offering hopeful examples of a possible future for India, for Indians living in the west, and for Indian girls, thus "proposing new social and political arrangements."

Stephens has identified the subtle power of this use of realism in children's literature, arguing that "[e]very book has an implicit ideology . . . usually in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought" (*Language and Ideology* 9). He notes that when "ideological positions" are "implicit," a book becomes "the more powerful vehicle for an ideology" because these invisible "ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implication that things are simply 'so'" (9). Bradford et al. also recognise this subtle power, and in their approach to transformative utopian children's literature, they take a position I also adopt in examining Indian children's novels:

> Far from assuming that utopian texts are progressive and liberatory . . . we are interested in tracking the extent to which contemporary texts re-inscribe conservative views and values embedded within narrative and discoursal features and naturalized because accepted as given. (5–6)

Despite the fact that the Indian children's novels I discuss seem both "progressive and liberatory," they similarly endorse hegemonic power structures.

The Authors' Positions

Vikas Swarup's determination to provide hope and a happy ending in *Slumdog Millionaire* resembles the position adopted by many Indian children's authors

of English-language novels, which position as ideal harmoniously multicultural societies underpinned by gender and racial equality.

For example, Kalpana Swaminathan, author of *Jaldi's Friends* (2003), is as aware of the impact of communal tensions and poverty in Mumbai as Swarup. In fact, she claims in her Author's Note that

> I wrote this book in the aftermath of 6 December 1992, a time of great bitterness and disillusionment. Bombay's twelve million, betrayed by their mothering city, fragmented by hate and suspicion, baffled by fear, had lost all belief in human justice. (193)

Although Swaminathan is not only aware of, but inspired by, the very same event that was so graphically portrayed and so integral to the plot of *Slumdog Millionaire*, the Mumbai riots of 1992 during which Hindu-Muslim fighting left approximately nine hundered dead, she chooses to focus on hope. Instead of exploring the communal tension that inspired her, she creates an allegory: a children's animal story in which dogs, humans, birds, an elephant, and a donkey cooperate to protect Mumbai from criminals. The only mention of religious tension is nearly buried in a dialogue exchange between two dogs, with a respected elder telling protagonist Jaldi that "humans have religion and look where it's got them, fooling around in mosques and temples and churches when they could be doing something to help the next man get on in life" (43).

Swaminathan describes her imagined world as "a parallel Bombay," where "the city was still an unending source of joy" and to which "it was only natural to look . . . for renewal" (193). She explains that she felt this was necessary because after the riots, "it was a rare adult who, in those dark days, could meet the level gaze of a child" (193). Many would agree with Swaminathan's determination to shield child readers from the horrors of this violence, but on the other hand, perhaps it is unfair to deny them the opportunity to form a clear understanding of the realities of communal tensions.6

With some context around the many and varied obstacles to peace and wellbeing Indians face daily on a personal and national level, it becomes easier to understand why Indian children's authors might want to offer aspirational visions of a better life instead of stark realism. In the diaspora, whereas the challenges may not usually be of a life and death nature, they do encompass racism and existential quandaries such as "the between-worlds dilemma" and the "shifting, heterogenous process of identity-formation" that postcolonial literary critic Shirley Geok-Lin Lim identifies as central to many "immigration/assimilation narrative[s]" (307). These kinds of challenges, too, are positively resolved in the diasporic novels, as many child characters participate in harmonious multicultural communities and develop healthy bicultural identities.

Whereas this aspirational tendency can be celebrated as encouraging and idealistic, it also opens up several disturbing questions, such as whose version

of ideal is being imagined? Who is excluded from these idealised states? What realities are omitted in this process? What contradictions ensue in these imagined states of nation, identity, and girlhood? For example, a number of the novels published in India, such as *Three Days to Disaster* (1990) by Deepa Agarwal and *The Chandipur Jewels* (2004) by Nilima Sinha, feature groups of children from varied religions, castes, regions, and linguistic and/or socio-economic backgrounds happily cooperating to fight crime and thus improve their communities. This imagined scenario highlights the quest for a national ideal of social harmony that has shaped Indian aspirations since before Independence: unity in diversity. I explore the way this ideal informs such texts in Chapter 4; at this point, however, it is important to note the extent to which it Bowdlerises actual communal riots, activities of the fundamentalist Hindu right, and continuing widespread casteism.

Other children's novels, including *Younguncle in the Himalayas* (2005) by Vandana Singh and *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet* (2006) by Kashmira Sheth, imagine girls who make the conscious decision to reject marriage in favour of furthering their education and careers. Whereas this vision of girlhood could be seen as empowering, and there are certainly Indian women who follow this path, such a narrative suggestion also glosses over realities in India such as female infanticide, which remains a significant problem, and female literacy rates, which are among the lowest in the world and far lower than male literacy rates. Further, in both India and in parts of the diaspora some girls are still subject to forced marriages.

Indisputably, then, much of the imagined world in many of the texts is idealised rather than realistic. Indian critics of children's literature are well aware of the soft-focus within much apparently "realistic" children's fiction published in India. As children's author and literary historian Ira Saxena observes, "'Realism' requires some modification since there are certain aspects of the real that are softened and often eschewed in books written for children" ("Fiction" 128). This adoption of an idealistic rather than realistic outlook and portrayal in the literature seems to be a means to shelter and protect children—an approach based on a particular understanding of childhood as a state of innocence. This idealism also seems inspirational—an approach based on the belief that children's literature is a powerful ideological tool. Despite the legacy of "softening" in Indian children's literature, there has recently been some recognition that presenting more realistic social content in Indian children's literature is desirable. For instance, in 1995 Navin Menon, an editor at one of the major Indian publishers of English-language children's literature, Children's Book Trust (CBT), claimed:

> In the past, there were certain set and rigid ideas about what should be given to children—an element of overprotection. Lately one finds a change in this attitude. . . . The leaning is more towards realistic stories to project to the child that literature does reflect real life. ("Children's Literature" 57)

Whereas this is true to a limited degree, Menon's statement is too sweeping. Most novels in this sample still imagine a "softened" view of life.

A telling example of this "softening" is textually foregrounded in *Tenali Raman* (2006) by Kavitha Mandana. During a discussion of the city of Vijayanagar at the zenith of its power, "Professor Saab," an archaeologist working for the Archaeological Survey of India, competes with "Auntie Ela," a geologist called a "cool grandmother-cum-geologist-cum-historian-cum-mithai-maker" (Mandana 94) to tell protagonist Sulekha and her friend TJ about its glorious past during the medieval Vijayanagar empire period. When Professor Saab emphasises the city's martial aspects, Auntie Ela is horrified, insisting that its legacy of peace, trade, literature, and architectural beauty made it "the most fabulous city in the world at the time," as it was designated by "Portuguese visitors" (104). For the time being I will refrain from examining the gender disparity implied within the naming of the two adult characters, as well as the colonial attitude made explicit here when Vijayanagar's worth requires European validation. I address such concerns in later chapters.

Instead, I will focus here on the attitude towards childhood which is clearly showcased. Auntie indicates her resistance to the Professor's interpretation of history when she insists, "So don't you go filling these young minds with stories of war. . . . This was a city of peace" (104). The children are amused by the debate, unaware of the ideological battle being waged before them. They are similarly amused and unaware when the Professor concedes Auntie's point (although he does not say that he agrees with her) not because she has made a convincing intellectual case, nor because he accepts the parameters she sets around which information is acceptable to share with the children, but rather because he is more interested in eating the sweets she has made: "'I cannot argue with someone who makes such tasty kheer kadam!' he said, grinning at all of us" (105). In other words, he takes neither Auntie nor her crusade seriously. Communicating with children is positioned as menial women's work by the Professor's easy dismissal of the debate. This brief example clearly represents the variety of complex attitudes towards gender, colonisation, the retelling of history, and especially childhood that are at play in a group of texts which may appear to be nothing more than simple, optimistic stories.

Despite the fact that "softening" can lead to disturbing absences, as is clear from Auntie's plea to the Professor to edit historical reality, it can sometimes be difficult to fault these children's authors for their infectiously enthusiastic idealism. Many are committed to liberal ideals of progress and social justice, and they see children's literature as a suitable vehicle for their aspirations. Their attitudes become clear when they refer to their work. For example, in an author's note Paro Anand announces that, "I strongly believe . . . children are not helpless little people, but powerful instruments of change. Through my stories, I would like to empower my young readers and make them take control of their own destinies" (*I'm Not Butter Chicken* 70). This is an interesting position, particularly in light of the way Anand and other children's writers

published in India sometimes offer prescriptive, narrow versions of empowerment that are more concerned with national service than the individual development that Anand's statement seems to imply.

It is important to note that authorial motivation seems very different in the diaspora. For example, the prolific British children's author Bali Rai[7] claims that he began writing for young people when "he became increasingly aware of how the Asian and black children around him felt segregated from books. His aim now is to put this right by writing stories that include such children and reflect their life experiences" (Flegg 13). Several other diasporic writers' determination to aid and guide child readers is revealed in the article "On the Seashore of Worlds: Selected South Asian Voices from North America and the United Kingdom" (2004) by Uma Krishnaswami, who is also a diasporic Indian children's author. Krishnaswami reports that for Jamila Gavin in the United Kingdom, children's literature offered a way to fight racism,[8] and in the United States, Tanuja Desai Hidier wanted to explore the struggle to develop identity between two cultural influences. Krishnaswami concludes that she and other authors of South Asian descent have an important cultural calling to "[use] story as a conveyor of truth" because "[t]he need for stories about South Asian cultures is so strong" (29). It is an interesting exercise to explore the versions of "truth" these novels portray.

Hidier is particularly concerned with bicultural identity and further delineates on her website her determination to create a positive, transformative narrative in *Born Confused*:

> I didn't feel I was Indian enough to write a book about being Indian. . . . And then it all clicked for me—that there was no such thing as "not Indian enough," that this was a negative way of describing a positive identity, a viable culture that exists in the spaces between things, in its own space. An ABCD [American Born Confused Desi] wasn't a failed Indian, but a being in her/his own right. And I was going to write about that being one day, and in so doing, clear away a little C—turn the confusion to clarity through creativity. ("The Q & A")

Perhaps not surprisingly then, Hidier ultimately offers an idealised, romantic ending in *Born Confused*. Although Dimple's identity crisis is difficult and painful, its smooth resolution in effect suggests that bicultural identity is perhaps not as complicated as it seems. Dimple concludes, "I no longer felt confused—well, a lot less confused. . . . I had the feeling I was home at last" (Hidier 491). Hidier, like other Indian children's authors from India and the diaspora, seems eager to offer empowering, optimistic textual solutions that are also sometimes oversimplified.

Mitali Perkins is equally aware of her own determination to offer positive narratives to young readers who are "stuck between cultures" or "squeezed between generations" ("Do *You* Need an Escape?"). She is also committed to

imagining positive resolutions for Indian girls struggling within the confines of a patriarchal culture. In *Rickshaw Girl* (2007), Perkins develops the character of Naima, a girl who is a talented artist, skillfully painting the *alpana* decorations that girls and women in her village create to embellish their homes. When Naima's family encounters financial difficulty, Perkins imagines a solution: the girl uses her artistic skills, which have been traditionally designated as female, to paint rickshaws, a traditionally male pursuit. Therefore, Naima helps to support her family as effectively as any male and comes to value herself as a girl: "It's a good thing I turned out to be a girl. The words chimed like sitar music in Naima's mind" (Perkins 77). On her website, Perkins compares her novel with those of South Asian writers for adults, emphasising her determination to provide a simple, happy ending and her satisfaction with this approach:

> I was grateful that I could leave my readers with hope. Unlike those who write for grownups . . . I don't feel the need to kill off a major character or underline the bleak condition of human nature. Arundhati Roy's lyrical prose in her mesmerizing *God of Small Things,* for example, wrecked one of my beach vacations by depressing me thoroughly. And WHY did Rohinton Mistry use the last three pages to tip his glorious *A Fine Balance*—and me—into the pit of despair? Ah, well. That's their problem. *I* write for kids. ("Why I Write for Kids")

Perkins clearly believes she is providing stories well suited to a child audience and is gratified by the process. She is not alone.

Many other authors are equally invested in their work and seem to view it as a fulfilling social mission. For women authors, this can take the form of what might be considered a feminist literary project, a position often evident in peritextual commentary. For example, Kashmira Sheth makes it clear that *Keeping Corner* (2007) is a fictionalised account of the challenges her aunt overcame as a Hindu child widow in pre-Independence India and positions the novel as a tribute to "child widows who suffered needlessly" (281). In this tribute, Sheth imagines a positive resolution for Leela, the twelve-year-old protagonist, who refuses to be constrained by traditional social restrictions on Hindu widows and reacts to the imprisonment of her body by acting out to protest unfair treatment. Instead of remaining housebound and dependent, Leela completes her education, supports herself by becoming a teacher, and influences others to see girls and women as capable of providing valuable contributions to society.

In keeping with authorial motivation and textual themes, I consider the capacity of these novels to act both as a literature of emancipation and a literature of containment, which is subversive in that it resists some traditional values yet socialising in that it reinscribes contemporary hegemonic values. Seen in a postcolonial context, it becomes clear that these children's novels' idealised visions of nation and identity are a fraught enterprise, and one with many fissures. In

attempting to offer simple, optimistic models of national and personal identity in a sociopolitical context as multifaceted as postcolonial India and the Indian diaspora, such fissures seem inevitable, for how could such complex contexts be simplified adequately? They cannot, as I will show.

In doing so, I engage in an act of postcolonial criticism, an activity which postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha argues "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" and "intervene[s] in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples" (171–172). Ironically, these novels often perpetuate a "hegemonic normality." Although critics recognise that "postcolonial literature speaks in multiple voices; it gives agency to and embraces all hitherto marginalized segments of the population—children, women, untouchables, and ethnic and racial minorities" (McGillis and Khorana 17), this is not always the case in these children's novels, which more often privilege particular values of the powerful middle class and exclude other Indian "voices."

One final note is necessary here. Throughout my discussion I refrain from making commentary on the literary merit of the texts. It may not be surprising that a group of texts with strong political aspirations occasionally reads like propaganda. One author in India strongly critiques this tendency, arguing that it produces "a moral science-cum-civics lesson with a thin anaemic storyline, which our English reading children shudder away from, to go headlong into books that are fun to read" (Sengupta, Poile, "Writing" 141–142). I concur with Sengupta's aesthetic concerns. It is true that many novels from both India and the diaspora are poorly written according to western standards of literary criticism. In their didactic fervour, the novels frequently sacrifice carefully developed characters, convincing dialogue, and nuanced plot, for instance, in favour of heavy-handed moral and thematic emphasis. This tendency is common in children's literature in both emerging national contexts and western multicultural contexts.

Many critics of western multicultural children's literature have wondered whether it is reasonable to expect aesthetic literary "complexity and expertise" from these texts and conclude that "to expect any less is to sell our children short" (Gates and Hall Mark 16). Further, in addition to aesthetic excellence, some critics have argued that every social issue or problem expressed in literature for adults should "eventually find its way into literature for children and young adults" and that "messages of hope . . . must not be didactic or simplistic nor distort the realities of life" (16). It is interesting that Gates and Hall Mark should consider both aesthetics and ideology. I, however, maintain a stronger sociopolitical focus and thus do not engage in a traditional aesthetic literary critique of the texts, although their literary shortcomings will often be obvious.

The reasons for this decision are twofold. First, I am more concerned with ideology than aesthetics here, as I have established. Second, in postcolonial literary criticism, judging emerging literatures by existing standards of western literary criticism is considered "Eurocentric" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 180). Instead, a common practice is "to engage with" texts as examples of "that hybridity which is the primary characteristic of all postcolonial texts" (180–182). This practice is premised on an ideal central to postcolonial theory, "difference on equal terms" (35), and will inform my readings. Accordingly, as I proceed, I celebrate the aspirations of these novels in the context of "difference" while questioning their perpetuation of unequal power structures.

As a showcase of contemporary attitudes towards Indian childhood and sociopolitical aspirations, the novels in this sample deserve thorough and sustained attention. Ultimately, I am interested in what Bradford et al. identify as one of the inherent qualities in transformative utopian children's literature: "some sense of humanistic propensity towards goodness and other-regardingness even within a permanently flawed world" (17), and the ways this tendency manifests in the novels. I applaud the way Indian children's authors offer hopeful strategies that imagine positive social transformation in their novels. On the other hand, I question the ways in which these sometimes also perpetuate hegemonic value systems, homogenisation, stereotypes, and/or essentialisation. My questioning will reveal that the Indian children's authors' attempts to influence, inspire, and coerce child readers into accepting particular versions of the Indian nation, Indian cultural identity in India and the west, and contemporary Indian girlhood, do not always allow the liberatory progress the novels appear to promise.

Chapter One
The Development of Contemporary, English-Language Indian Children's Novels

As this body of literature is unfamiliar to most readers, it will be helpful to understand the circumstances under which the texts in this corpus have developed. To this end, I briefly trace several key influences on the growth of English-language children's literature in India and the diaspora by providing a synthesis of relevant existing scholarship (primarily literary history and critical views). This outline creates a foundation for my subsequent arguments, which are underpinned by the position I establish here: in India these novels evolved out of an ethos which has long viewed children's stories as powerful vehicles for ideology, whereas in the diaspora they evolved within the context of another didactic body of stories that also provides a forum for ideology—western multicultural children's literature.

Part One: India

> And when you grow up reading the great Indian epics—the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*—you cannot help but read a little of them into your life. In fact, they *pervade* your life.
>
> **(Hidier 224)**[1]

> The Indian publishers should play the game with their eyes on children who ere long will make the nation.
>
> **(Kurup 21)**

The Legacy of the Pre-Independence Period

If one had to make a single observation about children's literature in India, it would be that its focus is on moral instruction. Whereas didacticism has long been discussed as one of the central components of children's literature in general, in India specifically literary historians and children's authors agree that the literature has always been and remains today primarily didactic (Berry 178; Saxena, "Indian Children's Stories" 61; Khorana, "The English Language Novel" 5). It is possible to view this socialising function as a legacy from an ancient Sanskrit text for children, the *Panchatantra*. According to legend, this collection of more than eighty stories, many of them animal fables, was originally commissioned by a king to instruct and entertain his three wayward sons. The prominent scholar of Indian children's literature and Secretary General of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) India, Manorama Jafa, identifies the purpose of these stories as "enlightenment of the young," designed to act as a "capsule of learning" so that the princes would learn "*Niti*—the art of intelligent living" in preparation for their sovereign duties ("The National Seminar" 10). Other ancient Sanskrit texts, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have also been part of Indian culture and religion for many centuries and also idealise ethical and spiritual value systems and behaviour, although these works were never intended primarily or solely for children.

Today, all of these narratives still occupy a central place in Indian culture. Not only have they become part of an oral tradition, but they are also now available in written re-tellings that are mass-produced and marketed specifically for children. "A visit to any bookstall" will reveal that "a whole lot of books based on traditional literature," as well as "new and creative literature," are currently available for children (Menon, "Historical Survey" 29). Although Indian children speak many different mother tongues, they are culturally united by several pan-Indian narratives which are translated into every Indian language, including the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Panchatantra*, with which "practically all Indian children, regardless of their creed or regional culture, are familiar" (Agarwal, "Role of Translating" 2). These ancient narratives are therefore still culturally current. Indeed, "every publisher looking for material to publish draws upon this unquestioned resource material so that the Indian epics, ancient lore, classical tales, folk tales, the *Panchatantra* form the bulk of children's literature today" (Menon, "Historical Survey" 24). The didactic influence of these ancient texts and the oral tradition seems to affect the contemporary novels in this sample, many of which do prescribe current strategies for "intelligent living," now on a national scale.

Before I continue, it is important to establish the way I will be using the terms "tradition" and "culture." Both are used frequently in scholarly discussions of South Asian children's literature, as is evident from the brief quotations above, but neither is ever defined. While working through the literature,

however, it is clear that these terms are employed in consistent ways, which inform my use of the terms. As I noted in the Introduction, the use of binary opposites in these novels, as well as in discussions of South Asian children's literature, is widespread. Consequently, I have employed this logic in my thinking. For instance, within this context tradition is generally positioned as the antithesis of modernity. Therefore, when I refer to "tradition," I mean behaviour and/or beliefs originally stemming from religious doctrine, as well as social norms based on cultural parameters practised historically in India, before the 1949 Constitution introduced the doctrine of liberal secularism and democracy which has come to represent "modernity" in contemporary Indian consciousness. A telling example of this usage is the way the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as the founding texts of culture and literature in India, are consistently designated "traditional literature," as they feature gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon. It is not coincidental that Hindu cultural artifacts are called upon to represent tradition; on the contrary, the Indian novels in this sample show evidence of a subtle Hinducentrism, an idea I discuss fully in Chapter 4.

No less than any other of the terms I utilise, the definition of "culture" is a fraught and often contested one.[2] For the purposes of this study, however, a simple definition from the *Random House Dictionary* will suffice. Culture can be understood as "the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group," in this case Indians, and "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another" ("Culture"). This second point, that culture is something transmitted from one generation to another, is central in the novels under discussion, especially those from the diaspora, where there is great emphasis on traditional Indian culture being passed on from parents and/or grandparents to children.

The *Panchatantra* aside, "[i]maginative literature intended specifically for children is not part of Indian literary tradition"; rather, until recently, English-language children's literature imported from the west dominated Indian children's recreational reading (Sunder Rajan, "Fictions of Difference" 100–101). This influence, which has had an impact at least equal to that of the ancient Sanskrit texts on the development of Indian children's literature, began in the colonial period. By the time the British arrived there were well-established traditional narratives in circulation, both written and oral. However, in the dissemination of these narratives, "children were never treated as a separate entity. . . . [T]here was no separate literature for children" (Berry 168). It was the colonial influence that instigated the production of a written body of literature produced specifically for children.

In the nineteenth century, British empire builders developed a system to create a class of educated Indians who mediated British and Indian interests. The study of English literature and the institution of English as the language of education in India played a key role in this indoctrination

process implemented by Lord Macaulay, who in his 1835 "Minute on Indian Education" stated:

> We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern. A class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinions, words and intellect. (qtd. in Leela 25)

While Macaulay was particularly concerned with civic administration, his impetus also had a significant impact on Indian culture. As a result of the Anglicist policy in education, exactly one generation after the passing of the Indian Education Act in 1835, Indians began producing the first works of fiction in both Indian languages and English (Mukherjee, Meenakshi, "The Beginnings" 94). Macaulay's decree was fundamental to the development of fiction in India, particularly that in English. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, in many ways this colonial foundation remains relevant to the contemporary Indian children's novels in my sample, which remain markedly influenced by British models of children's literature, despite the intense and concentrated effort to infuse these texts with a sense of "Indianness."

Also within the colonial educational context was the generation of textbooks, stories, and magazines specifically for children (Srinivasan 31; Menon, "Historical Survey" 25). Christian missionaries created children's books in Indian languages and later in English (Agarwal, "Role of Translating" 3), as part of a process of education and conversion.[3] Overall, then, "children's literature as a separate discipline has come from the West; contact with . . . England and the English language, has led to the growth of modern literature for children" (Jafa, "The Indian Subcontinent" 807). Nita Berry, a historian of Indian children's literature, believes that this change in attitude was concurrent with the philosophical recognition that "children were malleable and could be influenced by good books. Children's literature ideally offered information as well as entertainment, and fostered awareness of tradition and duties" (176–177), although this very assumption surely underpinned the much earlier production of the *Panchatantra* as well. In any case, didacticism shaped children's literature through the colonial period as it had in the precolonial period, although clearly with different goals.

Post-Independence

Despite its foundations in the pre-Independence period, it was not until after Indian independence that children's literature became recognisable as an established, widespread enterprise—a thriving area of publishing with its own conventions and characteristics (Menon, "Historical Survey" 25). In the long, slow process by which a body of children's literature became firmly established in India, its proponents recognised that it had a role to

play as part of a nationalist project. For instance, in a discussion in the article titled "The English Language Novel" (1988), the well-established scholar of Indian children's literature Meena Khorana makes explicit a widely held belief that "Indian youth reflects the promise of a New India after 200 years of foreign domination" and represents "a symbol for the moment of change for India" (8). This idea was paired powerfully with a strong belief in the power of children's literature as an effective vehicle for ideology. That power is consistently mentioned in discussions about Indian children's literature, which is seen by many to have "a special significance . . . as it very specifically reflects the totality of the mentality and values held by the society" (Bhatnagar 19). In this context, the reactive early insistence upon developing a body of contemporary, realistic Indian children's literature was clearly motivated by postcolonial leanings:

> [T]here was not enough indigenous literature for children in India apart from the epics and folklore and myths and legends. They were brought up on Western writing. . . . As a result these children were more conversant with Western life styles than with the way of life of children in other parts of their own country. (Shankar 260)

The explicit nationalist aspirations in this statement will be explored fully in Chapter 4. For now it suffices to note that implicit within the urgent goal to employ children's literature as a vehicle through which to disseminate Indian culture and sociopolitical goals was the assumption that it should reach as many children as possible. Therefore, English-language children's literature was viewed as a particularly powerful vehicle, as there was widespread recognition that English could serve the newly united country as a link language. I will return to this idea shortly.

First, however, it is important to recognise that in reality only a small percentage of children had access to English-language books. In fact, access to books remains today a significant challenge for many Indian children, especially those who are poor and/or live in rural areas. Beyond the fact that only approximately half the Indian population is literate, it is also important to note that economic disparity, particularly in rural India, prevents much of the population from owning or even accessing children's books (Agarwal, "Off the Beaten Track" 7). Further, supplying books throughout the vast country is difficult (Kurup 20), not least because of the lack of public libraries (Agarwal, "Off the Beaten Track" 7), and school libraries, which are present in only approximately 10% of schools (Panandiker 223). In addition to the relatively high price of the books, which puts them out of reach for the lower classes, other barriers to access include "lack of publicity and lack of finance" (Khurana 256).

This situation highlights the fact that as well as being an activity inspired by political ideology, producing children's books in India is also an economic enterprise faced with significant challenges. It is crucial to consider that publishing

English-language books is not only a political but also a capitalist—or socialist—enterprise requiring sustained effort and involvement from publishers. To some degree, this effort has so far been successful: by the early 1980s, almost 2,000 English-language children's books had been published in India (Srinivasan 4). To contextualise this figure, one can consider that on average approximately 6,000 children's books are published annually in both the United States and the United Kingdom (Saltman, "Canadian Children's Literature" 24). By contrast, "although India is one of the largest producers of books in the world, bringing out over 20,000 titles a year . . . a mere 500 books are for children," and "[h]ardly a dozen publishers are devoted exclusively to the creation of children's literature" (Berry 177). Consequently, producing thousands of English-language children's books of every genre and format in only a few decades is a notable achievement enabled not only by the idealistic nationalist proponents of children's literature in India, but also through the efforts of several large and small publishers, as well as the Indian government.

The publishing house Children's Book Trust (CBT), established in 1957 and partially funded by the Indian government (Kapoor 15–16; Rao, Mohini 69), was pioneering in its production of books specifically for children. Its early mission statement was clearly political: to "help the child to see the world through Indian eyes" (qtd. in Menon, "Historical Survey" 36). Perhaps not surprisingly, its first publications were "stories from the rich heritage of the *Panchatantra*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, other classics and old tales" (Kurup 12). CBT then branched out to publish information books and fiction. Today it publishes hundreds of titles primarily in English and Hindi, but also in some of the regional languages (Menon, "Historical Survey" 27). Approximately one-third of the novels published in India examined in this discussion were published by CBT.

Other publishers likewise began to produce books for children at this time. The government-owned National Book Trust (NBT) was also established in 1957. Its children's book division, the Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, was created to promote Indian books. The NBT's ideological platform is seemingly all-encompassing; according to the blurb in the catalogue of its children's series, it was created to "promote a sense of national and cultural unity by providing reading material to children all over the country" (qtd. in Agarwal, "The Role of Translating" 4). To that end, the press publishes not only in equal print runs of English and Hindi (Srinivasan 37), but also operates on the "policy that all its titles should be translated into as many of the officially recognised languages as possible" (Agarwal, "The Role of Translating" 4).

Other large Indian publishers, such as Rupa and India Ink, also began to include children's books on their rosters. International publishing houses such as HarperCollins and Penguin became similarly involved in the 1990s. These large houses reprint western children's literature as well as producing original English-language Indian children's literature. Approximately one third of the novels published in India examined in this discussion were published by Penguin India.

In addition to these giants, several small, independent children's publishers have recently developed in India. Tracing the development of houses such as Eklavya, Samskar, Tara, and Tulika, Indian children's author and critic Deepa Agarwal highlights their idealistic visions and posits the idea that they "have a special role to play" because they "produce books that . . . overcome the pressures that stifle creativity: narrow constraints of production costs, government policy, and traditional taboos" ("Off the Beaten Track" 6). For example, two houses that specialise in English-language children's literature have specific visions: Tulika aims to foster multicultural identity within India, as well as to portray realistic, rather than exotic, representations of the country, whereas Tara is committed to promoting positive textual representations of strong female characters. Clearly the publishers, with their varying commercial and ideological goals, play a significant role in the production of the novels in my sample. Although this is not the focus of my discussion, I do draw upon this point briefly in later chapters.

Linking the Nation: The Promise of English

At one level, the appeal of the English language in independent India stems from its potential to function as a pan-Indian link language. When vigorous debates finally led to the establishment of Hindi as India's official language, English was elected its (temporary) language of administration, and the various regional languages were also recognised as having a place in the new country's linguistic composition. Although this remains India's official language policy, the country's massive population of over a billion people is actually split by the use of at least eighteen languages in more than sixteen hundred dialects (Menon, "Historical Survey" 23). What this numerical breakdown does not convey is the degree to which the implementation of Hindi as India's official language was, and continues to be, a bitterly contentious issue, nor any hint of what a questionable political enterprise many Indians believe/d the continued use of the language of the coloniser to be. Moreover, some South Indians also regard Hindi as a language of colonisation, in that it was imposed on the South by the federal government from a base in the North. Clearly, these are intricate and significant issues in both contemporary and historical Indian politics, but my purpose here is simply to show how the use of English affects the production of children's literature, and my discussion will maintain this focus.

The new official linguistic milieu was supported by legislation decreeing that all children should be educated in English, Hindi, and their regional language. Due to a number of logistical variables, not the least of which is funding, this goal has never become reality. This aspiration did, however, result in the perception of a growing need for English-language books for children and the subsequent creation of organisations such as CBT, NBT, and the National

Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Menon, "Historical Survey" 36). Whereas English-language children's literature was considered a pedagogical tool, arguably its political role as a tool of nation building has ultimately superseded this initial conception.

It is ironic that what originally seemed a democratic enterprise—the use of English to link the nation, and children's literature to which all Indian children would have access—is actually an elite one. Far from allowing access to all Indian children, as ought to be the function of a link language, English-language texts were and are accessible only to a small minority. The idea that English could function as a pan-Indian link language has not materialised for the majority of Indians, of whom only approximately 3 % speak English (Baldridge). The roots of this situation lie in the colonial period's successful creation of a ruling class of English-speaking Indians, as Macaulay had decreed. This small English-speaking minority is largely comprised of the upper- and middle-class urban elite, whose children are usually educated in "English medium" schools and learn the English language from early childhood (Srinivasan 128–129). These schools are prestigious: many Indians believe they offer children excellent preparation for their future careers. Pupils are made aware that in order to succeed later in life, they must gain mastery over the English language, which has been "a symbol of prestige in the elitist society of India" since well before Independence (Srinivasan 26) and remains so today.

The use of English-language literature as a teaching tool to foster language becomes politically complicated in this context. In "Rethinking English: English Literature in the Indian Classroom" (2006), Ravi Sinha argues that English literature need not perpetuate a sense of European superiority, but rather has the capacity to enable de-colonialisation, particularly if is taught in conjunction with English-language Indian literature (109). He believes that

> [t]eachers of English in India are in a sense privileged because they are heirs to the great culture streams of the East and West. . . . This perception then will be passed on to our students and will help them to be useful citizens of India. (110)

This position clearly shows the political role that the novels in this sample could play in Indian classrooms. However, this idealistic approach is predicated on hegemonic assumptions about which Indians are in the position to become "useful," as only the smallest fraction participate in the educational experience Sinha describes. Many postcolonial critics take issue with this powerful social structure, as I will discuss.

Currently, authors and publishers who choose to produce English-language books for children knowingly access only the very narrow segment of the population that requires and can afford them. Srinivasan claims that as of the 1990s, this literature "has at last come of age" (2) and is "firmly established

in the literary map" (66). This could be at least partly because the English language has become ever more powerful and important in India since Independence (Deshpande, *Writing from the Margins* 64). Another major contribution to the growth and success of English-language children's literature has been the ever-increasing literacy and buying power of India's growing middle class (Srinivasan 2). The middle and upper classes are the main consumers of English-language fiction in India, whether it is produced for children or adults. Further, the authors who write in English in India generally tend to share the socioeconomic status of their intended audience. Indeed, some of the women children's authors from India are married to high-ranking government officials. One example is Nilima Sinha, the president of IBBY India and a prolific writer and critic of Indian children's literature. Her husband, Yashwant Sinha, was India's Finance Minister from 1990 to 1991 and 1998 to 2002, and Foreign Minister from 2002 to 2004.

This elite production and distribution enterprise makes it difficult to consider English "an effective tool of communication" which can provide "the vital link in unifying heterogenous elements" in "the Indian multilingual, multicultural, multireligious context," as Srinivasan contends (25). Instead of acting as a tool of democracy, English-language children's books in India are exclusive cultural constructs which ostensibly serve to foster language skills as well as to provide entertainment, but also indoctrinate hegemonic values and norms, shaping the young members of the socioeconomic group that will soon become the new nation-builders. As Kurup suggests, "The Indian publishers should play the game with their eyes on children who ere long will make the nation" (21). When they produce books in English, this is certainly what they do.

The use of English language provides an overarching frame that introduces the kinds of contradictions at play within the texts, which I explore in later chapters. On the one hand, using English to create a national children's literature is a clearly postcolonial act. Appropriating the colonial language for new postcolonial uses indicates movement towards de-colonisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 37), and this is what the authors I discuss aspire to do. On the other hand, such departure from colonialism must involve the "denial of the privilege" of English and "a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 37). That this does not occur within the novels is precisely the paradox in which I am interested.

The issue of the English language use is by no means exclusive to the texts in this corpus but rather extends throughout Indian literature, where it is the subject of such vigorous controversy that the renowned novelist for both children and adults, Shashi Deshpande, calls it a "hornet's nest" (*Writing from the Margins* 61). While some critics have denounced the use of English in Indian fiction, others have defended it, refuting claims that its focus is "too urban, or too concerned with the experience of an Indian elite whose concerns are

removed from the 'essential' India of the rural village" by insisting that English "is in no sense a bar to this work being profoundly Indian in concern and potentially as rich a means of reproducing Indian society and thought" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 122). Whereas this may be so, in the case of the children's novels I examine, many texts are set in New Delhi or Mumbai and all but a few feature middle-class child protagonists, thereby portraying a relatively narrow version of "Indian society."

Postcolonial critics have explored this troubling relationship between language and class; for example, Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the use of English in literature is a complex issue "entangled with questions of class, mobility and readership" (*The Perishable Empire* 169), whereas Svati Joshi contends that English enables "the intelligentsia" to "evolv[e] its agenda of inventing 'tradition,' 'history,' 'culture,' and forg[e] an ideological hegemony" (6). This positioning of language occurs in the postcolonial Indian nation because a necessary "centralization of culture" can be achieved "through the institution of education and, in a close replication of the colonial state, through the English-using urban middle class" (Joshi 6).[4] These concerns have broad political ramifications, in that there is "collusion between English and various systems of dominance, both in relation to the Indian political economy and to culture" (Raina 291). Because English is used in both higher education and state administration, it continues to reinforce historical inequity and therefore "invites itself to be viewed as a grid out of which colonialism perpetuates itself, and quite in the face of the provisions and the telos of the Indian Constitution" (Raina 292). What this means is that despite the liberal promise of equality inherent within the Indian Constitution, an uneven social hierarchy still exists in which urban English-speaking elite Indians wield the majority of power in the nation. Traditionally disenfranchised Indians, such as rural, low-caste, or tribal peoples remain virtually powerless—this hierarchical system is reflected clearly in Indian children's novels.

As will become clear in the following chapters, the role of the English language in maintaining hegemonic power structures has direct relevance to the novels in my sample, particularly when they aspire to act as nation-building tools to help prepare an elite, urban class of children to become the next rulers of India. Although the language debate I have briefly outlined is not taken up by critics and historians of South Asian children's literature, it is possible to voice similar concerns about the use of English in this literature, as I do here. These seemingly democratic, inclusive texts are deliberately produced primarily for middle- and upper-class urban Indian children, thus perpetuating a built-in exclusion of other Indian children who lack the financial, geographic, and linguistic means to access this body of literature, and are therefore not exposed to its "preparatory" outlook on life, which could be seen as providing moral and intellectual tools for future success.

Regardless of the effects this literature might actually incur in reality (which would be difficult to assess, at any rate), its aspirations must be considered

with seriousness. Many of these apparently simple, entertaining texts actually perpetuate a hegemonic value system, and the use of English is, as Mukherjee, Joshi, and Raina maintain, troubling when regarded in this national context. Consequently, whereas its political ramifications remain largely unexamined in scholarly discussions of South Asian children's literature, I argue that the use of English can be seen as a key choice in the use and dissemination of this literature as a nation-building tool in India. Indeed, the claim that "Indian writing in English is uniquely placed to re-imagine the nation" (Mee 336) is directly applicable to the children's novels in this sample, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4.

Whereas the issue of language is central to an understanding of these texts in India, in the diaspora it is more incidental, although no less political in its own way. Large populations of Indian immigrants have settled in the English-speaking countries of the world, especially in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. For authors in these communities, English might seem the obvious first, and often only, choice, in relation to mainstream publishing and distribution. However, the use of English can be quite politically charged for these writers. For example, in a project investigating the first generation of South Asian authors writing in Canada, notable literary activity was identified in only three languages: English, Punjabi, and Gujarati; literature was most often published in English (Sugunasiri 6). The study indicates that South Asian authors must decide whether to use English and that they usually do so if they wish to reach an audience outside of their own ethnic or linguistic enclave. This is particularly true of South Asian children's literature in the west, which finds a significant market as multicultural literature positioned in institutions such as schools and libraries, most of which function exclusively in English.

Part Two: The Diaspora

> [T]he Indian social identity is still perceived as foreign. Their writings reflect a strong preference for themes that reaffirm cultural ties with India because of an overwhelming sense of exile and nostalgia and a desire to portray the Indian situation in the best possible light.
>
> **(Khorana 409. "Break Your Silence." 1993.)**

Diasporic Indian children's literature has developed sporadically. Without dedicated institutional support or a unified ideological platform, and produced by an even smaller minority outside of India than inside the country, it was not until the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries that an identifiable body of literature came into being. As recently as 1993, Meena Khorana, whose literary history of these texts provides an invaluable foundation for

the remainder of this chapter, observed that compared with other diasporic Asian writing for children produced in the United States, "Indian literature is at an earlier developmental phase" and is comprised of "an abundance of traditional literature" which "reaffirm[s] . . . intellectual and cultural roots in India" (393). Khorana called for a change:

> As Indians become more settled . . . and their numbers increase, it is hoped that their children's literature will also evolve an Asian American consciousness that will reflect their experiences in American society. (393)

As I discuss in later chapters, this "evolution" has begun to take place, and it is not limited to the United States.

Fifteen years after Khorana's observations, Soophia Ahmed claimed in her editorial in the *Indian/South Asian Children's Literature* special issue of the *Journal of Children's Literature* (2008) that whereas "English-language literature for children—both in India and abroad. . . . is still growing and changing," it has "acquired a new depth, a soul of its own" (3). Other critics, though, view developments in the diaspora as nascent. For example, Donna Gilton's recent survey, *Multicultural and Ethnic Children's Literature in the United States* (2007), reports that "in recent years, a very small English-language Western-style literature with South Asian roots has started to develop in the English-speaking Western countries" (130). Gilton notes that there are few publications available in this area, with even fewer authors producing most of the work; she observes that in contrast South Asian diasporic writing for adults is very well established and predicts that the children's literature will continue to develop (130).

My research suggests Gilton's prediction is correct. However, she neglects to mention the existence of earlier South Asian children's literature, the development of which Khorana discusses extensively, not only describing the literature's development but also offering explanations for its slowness to blossom and to receive critical attention in comparison with other diasporic or immigrant children's literatures. I will discuss these issues after tracing some of the key developments in the diasporic texts.

Early Foundations

The most thorough source chronicling the production of South Asian children's literature is Khorana's compilation, *The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young Adults: An Annotated Bibliography of English-Language Books* (1991), which maintains a focus on texts set in South Asia, rather than on South Asian authors per se, and excludes any texts set in the west. Clearly, Khorana's parameters and purpose are very different from my own. However, it is interesting to note that of the novels Khorana lists, only a small minority

is written by authors with discernibly South Asian names. The remainder—the vast majority—is written by what seem to be western authors and set in South Asia.[5] It seems that a proliferation of children's books *about* South Asia have abounded in the English-speaking west, whereas those *by* South Asian authors have until recently been much rarer.

Most of the early diasporic Indian children's literature was produced in the United States, where the founder of diasporic Indian children's novels was Dhan Gopal Mukerji.[6] He arrived in the United States as an idealistic young socialist during the early twentieth century and began to write prolifically, producing several children's novels published by Dutton from 1922 to 1932. These old-fashioned stories are now out of print, and most, like the majority of early diasporic South Asian children' s literature, are difficult or impossible to source. The fact that Mukerji's name remains known in children's literature today is probably only because he was recognised by the literary establishment with a Newbery Award in 1928 for his novel, *Gay Neck,The Story of a Pigeon*.

Like most of Mukerji's children's books, *Gay Neck* is an animal story that weaves together the fate of humans and animals while espousing the doctrines of humanism. It concludes,

> He who fears, even unconsciously, or has his least little dream tainted with hate, will inevitably, sooner or later, translate these two qualities into his action. Therefore, my brothers, live courage, breathe courage and give courage. Think and feel love so that you will be able to pour out of yourselves peace and serenity as naturally as a flower gives forth fragrance. Peace be unto all! (197)

Even when writing a story of war, such as *Gay Neck*, Mukerji imagines positive and harmonious resolutions to his narratives. Many of his other novels, all set partially or wholly in India, including *Kari the Elephant* (1922) and *Hari the Jungle Lad* (1924), also explore a spiritual connection between animals and humans. For example, *Kari the Elephant* concludes: "Though as an animal Kari is lost to me, my soul belongs to his soul and we shall never forget each other" (135). Mukerji's stories insist upon acceptance and non-violence, and he founded a trend in diasporic Indian children's literature in which these values are central. But after Mukerji stopped producing work, only a trickle of diasporic Indian children's literature was forthcoming until the 1990s.

During this intervening period, the most frequently produced works were "[t]raditional literature," which, Khorana contends, were directed at diasporic Indian children and meant to direct them "to their cultural and spiritual roots in India" ("Break Your Silence" 402). However, a few novels were also produced through the mid-twentieth century. These are set in India and primarily focus on traditional village life there, often demonstrating the need for modernisation. This is a contrast with contemporary diasporic Indian children's novels, many of which are set outside of India, with occasional forays

back to the "motherland." Khorana contends that these early novels were aimed at a non–South Asian audience. She believes that

> These novels reflect the changing attitude of the American towards India, from that of India as an exotic land of spirituality and wildlife to a newly-independent nation with insurmountable problems of poverty, illiteracy and lack of technology to the recent examination of the validity of Indian values, beliefs and behaviours. ("The Image of India" 5)

By no means have these "attitudes" disappeared; they are still present in the diasporic novels in this sample, as I discuss in later chapters. According to Khorana, common themes in the texts of this mid-century period include modernisation, village life, and the role of education in the child's life ("Break Your Silence" 401).

Khorana laments this early focus, complaining in 1993 that "there is not a single children's book that describes the experiences of Asian Indians in America" ("Break Your Silence" 395), which she clearly believes is necessary. She notes that this kind of story was produced earlier "in the United Kingdom, where Indians, as former British subjects, have a longer tradition," citing both *East End at Your Feet* (1976) by Farrukh Dhondy and *Sumitra's Story* (1982) by Rukshana Smith as examples ("Break Your Silence" 410). She urges Indian writers in the United States to "attempt to explore the conflict between modern and traditional values, the problems of growing up, and the dreams and hopes of Indian children with understanding and depth" ("The Image of India" 11).

Nilima Sinha made a similar complaint from India in 1994, claiming that "Indian children face . . . problems in countries where they have settled in large numbers. Unfortunately, there are very few books which can help them face their problems with confidence" ("International Understanding" 13). To remedy this situation, she prescribes "[m]eaningful stories set in the UK or USA dealing with Indian children who face problems of integration" (14). But Sinha also sets a condition, asserting that these books should "bring out the best of Indian culture" in order to help Indian children "develop a pride in their own heritage, so that they can face another culture with confidence" (13). Such conditions, whether explicit or implicit, make for a problematic, often essentialised, portrayal of "Indianness" in the novels, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

Sinha sets up the kind of worrying paradox that troubles the texts. Not only does she hope to establish national pride in a transnational context by creating an exclusively positive portrayal of India, she also argues that these same books can and should play several roles simultaneously: to "help shed prejudices"; to "creat[e] understanding and sympathy for those who are different"; to help "minorities and immigrants to integrate"; and also to "inculcat[e] love for the earth and formation of a global perspective" (14–15). Sinha's liberal aspirations are transparent, here, but they are also conflicted. How is it possible to create understanding, let alone formulate a global perspective, without

providing a complete picture? I explore such paradoxes more fully in subsequent chapters, but for now the main point is that the corpus of realistic stories exploring bicultural identity that Khorna and Sinha called for is realised in the contemporary novels forthcoming from the English-speaking west in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century.

The Relevance of Recent Developments in Multicultural Children's Literature

In her discussions of South Asian children's literature in the west, Khorana frequently makes comparisons with children's literature from other diasporic communities, particularly Asian ones. Indeed, the current small explosion of South Asian children's literature is paralleled by similar growth in many children's literatures of non-Anglo-European origins, many of which also began to "boom" (a relative term, to be sure), through the 1990s. Discussions of these texts, as well as their production, often fall under the banner of multicultural children's literature, a field which is prominent particularly in the western institutional dissemination of children's literature. It is notable that in the Introduction of *The Indian Subcontinent in Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Khorana indicates that the texts she lists are, or should be, multicultural, and that they will take their place in the realm of multicultural children's literature, by applying criteria commonly used in that field to measure cultural validity:

> In addition to examining each novel according to literary criteria, they also evaluate the novel's sensitivity to multicultural and international issues. For instance: Does the book reflect an ethnocentric attitude? Are cultural details presented respectfully? Is there stereotyping in characterisation, plot, and themes? Is there any distortion of facts? (viii)

These questions, particularly the last, need to be kept in mind throughout the rest of this discussion, and they have ramifications far beyond the context of multicultural children's literature. Here, however, I will concentrate on how the expanding field of multicultural children's literature has provided a place for the diasporic texts.

When I discuss "multicultural children's literature," I am referring to two spheres. First, I use the term broadly to refer to a practice now common within the dissemination of children's literature in western educational institutions (including libraries and schools from the primary through postgraduate levels): incorporating into circulation and discussion texts from "parallel cultures".[7] If the volume of publications currently focused on multicultural children's literature is any indication, there can be no question that this approach now has a well-established place in the larger field of children's

literature. The production and discussion of multicultural children's literature has become widespread in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, although each country approaches it somewhat differently.

As well, I am referring to a body of literary texts. I borrow my working definition of what constitutes "multicultural children's literature" from Pamela Gates and Dianne Hall Mark. In their analysis in *Cultural Journeys: Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults* (2006), they discuss multicultural children's literature as

> a body of literature that spans all literary genres but generally focuses on primary characters who are members of underrepresented groups whose racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, or cultural status historically has been marginalized or misrepresented by the dominant culture. (3)

It crucial to note that this body of literature tends to be heavily didactic, with specific ideological aims. In this way, it shares the approach of traditional Indian literature disseminated to children, such as the *Panchatantra*, as well as the contemporary, English-language children's novels published in India. Like the *Panchatantra*, multicultural children's literature aims to provide children with knowledge and attitudes that will prepare them to live successfully within their societies, an approach often affected by nationalist goals. The knowledge and attitudes multicultural children's literature aims to provide are specific to the needs of contemporary, multicultural societies. For example, a leading scholar of multicultural children's literature in the United States, Mingshui Cai, summarises its general pedagogical underpinnings:

> Books depicting experiences of non-mainstream cultures can help children from those cultures to develop cultural identity and pride in their cultural heritage. The inclusion of such books in the curriculum can boost these children's self-esteem and enable them to experience successes in school. Furthermore, multicultural literature provides opportunities for all students to understand and appreciate different cultures, thus learning to respect each other and live in harmony. (19)

Although children's literature has long been didactic, the development of multicultural children's literature has only recently provided a forum for the particular values Cai outlines. Thus, the content is new, but the approach is not.

Widespread changing sociopolitical values helped to open a place for this new content. In *Radical Change* (1999), Eliza Dresang contends that since the 1960s, "changing boundaries" in children's literature have created space for "literature with characters from parallel cultures" to emerge (30). She also marks this period as a time during which an "increasing number of authors wrote about realistic personal problems," including "identity, intimacy, gaining independence" (32). These two developments together have helped to

create a welcoming atmosphere for the diasporic novels in this sample, many of which portray young bicultural protagonists coping with the "personal problems" Dresang outlines. It seems reasonable to conclude that the rise of multicultural children's literature has played an important role in creating space for the diasporic texts, particularly with the establishment of a market and network of dissemination for the texts.

Peritextual commentary supports the idea that the field of multicultural children's literature has provided a venue for diasporic Indian children's novels by demonstrating that the intended audience of this literature includes but also extends beyond Indian children in the west. For instance, in the "About the Author" blurb at the back of *Monsoon Summer* (2004), readers are informed that Mitali Perkins is "dedicated to creating and encouraging fiction *for* young people caught between cultures" (261, emphasis mine).[8] Pedagogical tools, such as the "Reader's Guide" and "Sample Questions" at the back of Perkins's *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* (2005), also hint that a wider audience may hopefully come to greater cultural understanding through these texts:

> When Dadu recites a poem written by Rabindranath Tagore, Sunita is surprised to learn that a Bengali Indian has ever won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Look up "Nobel Prize" on the Internet. Can you find people from your own heritage who have won this international award in literature, peace, economics, or any other category? (178–179)

Further, the frequent overt explanations of cultural details indicate an intended audience that includes non-Indian readers. A representative example of this common pattern occurs in *Keeping Corner*, when the narrator explains, "Diwali was our biggest holiday, celebrating Lord Rama's return after fourteen years of exile" (Sheth 173). This broad intended audience provides publishers with a wide potential circulation and the opportunity to solicit sales from institutions such as schools and libraries.

It is important to realise, though, that South Asian children's literature, including the novels in this sample, has been slow to become established in the west, particularly in comparison to other Asian children's literatures, with which it is frequently discussed.[9] This low profile of Indian authors and texts seems particularly widespread in North America. For instance, Indian or South Asian texts are rarely mentioned in many bibliographies of multicultural children's literature. Neither of the American publications *Many Peoples, One Land: A Guide to New Multicultural Literature for Children and Young Adults* nor *Promoting a Global Community through Multicultural Children's Literature* (both by Helbig and Perkins, both published in 2001) mention a single one. In another American bibliography, *Connecting Cultures: A Guide to Multicultural Literature for Children* (Thomas 1996), 1,637 texts are listed, but only 28 are listed under the heading "Asian—India or Pakistan,"

and only 4 authors have discernibly South Asian names. All texts listed are picture book re-tellings of traditional tales.

On the other hand, as early as 1985 in the United Kingdom, *The Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Books for a Multi-Cultural Society*, which is introduced with the statement that "[c]hildren of all ages have the right to a body of literature which reflects naturally the varied experiences and rich cultural diversity of the people who together make up our society" (Elkin 1), included reviews of several novels and stories by, and brief biographies of, Jamila Gavin and Anita Desai.

There may be other explanations for the late development of these novels, particularly in North America. For example, literary critics note that before it is possible to produce literature, a parallel culture needs a "long gestation period" in the new country (Parameswaran 86). And whereas people have been emigrating from India to the west for over a hundred years, only in the past few decades have significant communities developed.

By now it should be clear that contemporary English-language children's novels occupy a different position in India and the diaspora, although both are produced with largely didactic intent. In India the texts evolved out of a children's literature shaped by ancient Sanskrit narratives, a well-established oral tradition, and post-Independence national aspirations, and they are produced for a small, elite audience of urban, English-speaking middle- and upper-class children. In the diaspora, however, the development of multicultural children's literature helped to create a space for their emergence. The small minority of authors that produces these texts is part of a parallel culture that must wrest space from the dominant culture in order to be heard. These authors must shape material to appeal to a wide audience composed of children from the Indian diaspora *and* those from many other cultures. These varied conditions of composition, as well as crossover influences occurring when Indian authors travel and migrate between countries, inform the ways nation, cultural identity, and girlhood are imagined in the texts, as I will discuss throughout the remaining chapters. Understanding the development and production of these texts provides a useful foundation prior to extended examination; understanding the extensive contributions of women writers to this corpus, as well as their liberal feminist aspirations, is equally important, as I discuss next.

Chapter Two
Indian Women Writers: Imagining the New Indian Girl

> [A] series of liberal as well as progressive legislations have been enacted to improve the socio-economic status of girl child [*sic*]. However, effective enforcement of these laws can be guaranteed only by public awareness and mass pressure to provide her with equal opportunities.
>
> The status of girl child is changing mainly due to legislative measures, social development, increasing educational facilities and awareness through media.
>
> **(Bhadra 18)**

> In Western countries, the women's issue [*sic*] is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual roles. In India, for the majority, it is a question of stark survival. The few who have escaped the vicious existential circle through education and better opportunities also find themselves in a constant tussle with the inevitable social mores with the oppressive weight of tradition behind.
>
> **(Krishnaswamy 5)**

Indian Women Writers and Feminist Children's Literature

Having outlined the way contemporary, English-language children's novels developed in India and the diaspora, I now see it as crucial to consider one similarity that extends across the majority of the novels regardless of place of publication: the central role of girl characters. Almost half the texts in this sample focus on girl protagonists or groups of girls, and of the remainder, the majority feature collective protagonists composed of both boy and girl characters, both of which play significant roles in the narrative. This could be considered a disproportionate representation in a culture that has traditionally

valued boys more highly than girls, and it may be due to the fact that these texts are primarily written by women. Of the 55 authors in this sample, 46 are women: they have collectively created 83 of the 101 novels in the corpus. Strictly in relation to numbers, then, it is important to consider the ways that women writers represent Indian girls. Thematically, though, there are more significant reasons to examine the portrayals of girl characters, which are shaped by feminist value systems.

Scholars of children's literature have frequently discussed the connection between women writers and children's texts.[1] In relation to contemporary Indian children's literature generally, "[t]he majority of Indian writers of children's fiction are women, for reasons that undoubtedly have to do with their putative understanding of the child 'sensibility'" (Sunder Rajan, "Fictions of Difference" 102). In traditional Indian society, grandmothers played the role of oral storyteller; perhaps women writers are taking up this mantle in the contemporary context. Whereas the production of children's literature, even when undertaken by women, does not in and of itself constitute a feminist act, the sample novels written by women do seem to make up a feminist literary project, although one that is related to nation-building in complex ways.

A basic tenet of postcolonial criticism is that published literature allows the possibility for traditionally silenced members of society who "have been powerless to take part in the conversations of cultural and other forms of political activity" to rectify these imbalances (McGillis, "Introduction" xxi). Discussing postcolonial children's literature, McGillis observes that there "is a desire for recognition on the part of people who have been either invisible or unfairly constructed or both. The connection with children and women seems inevitable" ("Introduction" xxi). Postcolonial critics have pointed out that "the parallel between the situation of postcolonial writing and that of feminist writing is striking" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin , *The Empire Writes Back* 7). In contemporary Indian children's literature, feminist ideology is demonstrated through the widespread presence of girl characters and the pursuit of gender equality, with the result that "[s]tories where girls are central characters and initiate action are, therefore, a common feature in contemporary children's literature" (Banerjee, Suchismita 6).

This is significant because in traditional Indian literature, girl characters were either absent or passive (Jain 13; Jafa, "Women in Children's" 1). Over the past few decades, Indian women authors have begun to create children's novels which refute this pattern, in particular by positioning girls as capable of contributing to national goals. In this sense, most of the novels by women Indian children's authors can be considered a form of feminist children's literature. However, whereas feminist children's literature can be defined as one in which the protagonist "triumphs" over "gender-related conflicts" (Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* 4), a prevalent narrative pattern in many of these novels, it can also be considered a form that is premised on a feminist ideology espousing "that all people should be treated equally, regardless of gender, race,

class, or religion" (Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* 2), a definition that renders some of the texts problematic due to their privileging of middle-class girls.

Only girls from this socioeconomic stratum are empowered and progressive. Imagined through the lens of liberal feminism, they act to expand and even reject traditional, prescriptive social roles for Indian girls in several ways. First and foremost, girl characters insist that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in relation to education and self-determination. As a result, the novels reject traditional constructions of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable to society than boys. Next, Indian women writers both celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls and women as part of strong, interconnected webs of family and community relationships. From this cooperative position, girl characters unanimously succeed in achieving transformation by acting with agency to improve their own lives, the lives of people about whom they care, and/or the well-being of their communities according to a liberal value system. However, these new social roles for Indian girls are nearly as prescriptive as traditional roles were, simply with different parameters. In India these relate to a national agenda, and thus this chapter examines primarily texts published in India.

Many of these portray girls working actively alongside friends and family to help others, primarily by ensuring community safety and harmony. For instance, in *Three Days to Disaster* (Agarwal 1990),[2] Sonali helps her brother and their friend to solve a crime and protect the citizens of Delhi from a deadly illness. In *Where Has the Forest Gone?* (1994) by Rupa Gupta, Babli works with her brother to stop a corrupt developer from destroying a forested area and is rewarded with access to education. In all three of Shashi Deshpande's adventure-mysteries (2006), Polly and Minu work alongside their brother, male cousins, and friends to solve crime and thereby secure peace in their relatives' hometown.

In the diasporic novels, the focus is more individualistic, although it also supports mainstream multicultural agendas. Girls often question parental and cultural expectations in novels about identity crises, learning that they are part of an interconnected web of supportive relationships which can aid both personal growth and individual achievement. For instance, in *Motherland* (2002) by Vineeta Vijayraghaven, Maya comes to a deeper understanding of what it means to be an American girl of Indian birth after spending the summer with her maternal extended family in India and interacting extensively with her grandmother, ultimately improving her difficult relationship with her mother. In *Maya Running* (2005) by Anjali Banerjee, Maya comes to an understanding of what it means to be a Canadian girl of Indian birth when she violates the integrity of her family relationships and must journey to India to re-establish them. In *Indie Girl* (2007) by Kavita Daswani, Indie navigates relationships with several powerful women as she attempts to succeed as an intern fashion journalist while simultaneously working out her

understanding of herself as female, American, and Indian. All three characters (as well as other girl protagonists in the diasporic texts) devise a strategy by which to feel comfortable in, and contribute appropriately to, their multicultural societies.

These celebrations of girls' capacity to succeed in improving lives and strengthening relationships, both their own and others', involve complex negotiations between gender and tradition and seem to seek to re-write Indian patriarchy, "the source of the injustice of the cultural expectations, demands, and burdens placed on women according to gender roles" (Kafka 187). Women writers imagine non-traditional ways of being for their girl characters—ways that position gender equality as their foundation. In doing so, they create a "new Indian girl" character that is present in the majority of contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels written by women. These "new Indian girls" function to represent a modern, postcolonial India in which gender equality is beginning to find a happy home. Setting up a binary which positions societal values from precolonial and colonial India as backwards and problematic, the novels demonstrate the value of girls to contribute to the nation in postcolonial India—at least *some* girls, according to some writers.

The idea of the postcolonial Indian "new woman" has been discussed by several scholars, notably by Sunder Rajan in *Real and Imagined Women* (1993). Sunder Rajan recognises a national imperative to develop a contemporary pan-Indian identity and locates it in "the Indian *woman*" who is not only "wife, mother and homemaker" but also "modern and liberated," because only she can balance "(deep) tradition and (surface) modernity" to "[save] the project of modernisation-without-westernisation" (130). Sunder Rajan argues that the "construction of a 'new' 'Indian' woman" is perpetuated in "the contemporary discourse of women in India" and questions the use of this figure in nationalist and capitalist agendas (130). She finds it problematic that this new Indian woman is consistently portrayed as urban, middle-class, and educated, in that the dissemination of this idealised figure via print and television media[3] promotes "a normative model of citizenship" (130). When this powerful image of the new Indian woman is dominant, it not only acts to influence and contain Indian women, it also prevents other versions of Indian womanhood from gaining validation. Sunder Rajan's concerns are also applicable to contemporary children's novels written by Indian women, in that they portray a similarly influential and containing fictional figure that I have identified as a "new Indian girl."

Having read across a broad spectrum of these texts, I have identified a tendency for women writers of English-language Indian children's novels to use girl characters in ways comparable to the new Indian woman theorised by Sunder Rajan. Cumulatively, this body of work is in the process of constructing a model of girlhood that is ideologically significant. These "new Indian girl" characters are shaped by liberal feminist ideals and successfully balance tradition and modernity in support of contemporary

societal needs (both national and multicultural). They honour tradition by working from within and improving family and community relationships. At the same time, they embrace modernity in their fight for gender equality, which they attain by developing themselves through education and by making valuable contributions to public society, outside of the domestic sphere. New Indian girls work to overcome restriction in search of empowerment—they *are* the new India. For some readers at least, this model of girlhood is likely to be inspirational.

This should not obscure the fact that, as with the "new Indian woman," it is primarily urban, middle-class girls who are most likely to gain the empowered status of new Indian girls, whereas girls from rural regions, low-caste groups, or low socioeconomic status are either absent from these texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girls to rescue them. This positions the textual image of the new Indian girl as a normative model that leaves little space for validation of other versions of girlhood. Clearly this portrayal of the new Indian girl is incomplete, but it can also provide aspirational visions of gender equality, particularly in the pursuit of educational opportunities for girls, an important focus in India today. The overarching goal of the new Indian girl character in Indian publications is to improve society in accordance with liberal values and to create an imagined positive outcome according to a hegemonic value system. In other words, her job is to transform social gender roles so that middle-class girls can contribute to nation-building activities while leaving relatively undisturbed current class and caste hierarchies.

The new Indian girl accomplishes this in many ways in the novels, all of which are underpinned by a liberal value system and thus subject to its shortcomings. For example, many middle-class new Indian girls are portrayed as empowered and powerful at the outset of the text, thus presenting an idealised portrayal of girlhood according to a liberal feminist outlook. The realities of the vast majority of actual Indian girls, which differ substantially from the textual image of the new Indian girl, are often absent from the texts. When realistic social issues pertinent to many Indian girls, such as child labour and education for impoverished and/or low-caste girls, are addressed in some children's novels by Indian women, it is often in a peripheral manner. For example, in Shashi Deshpande's *A Summer Adventure* (2006), the rescue of Shanta, a servant girl living in slave-like conditions, is the story's secondary plot and provides its happy ending. The resolution is a common one: she eventually becomes a servant in the protagonists' family. This shift in Shanta's status is later portrayed in a sequel as positive and enlightened according to a liberal value system:

> Later, since Shanta had no parents or family of her own, Amma had taken her into their house. Now she had become their friend, pupil (Minu was teaching her how to read and write), admirer, and Ammu's devoted helper. (*The Hidden Treasure* 103)

Shanta is an orphan and therefore extremely vulnerable, so the family's rescue of her could be crucial to her survival. However, regardless of the improvement in her circumstances, her own desires are never made clear, she never vocalises her personal goals, and she remains a servant. She ultimately remains passive and dependent, corroborating Sunder Rajan's argument that the new Indian woman is urban and middle-class and that other models of womanhood fall short; so it is with new Indian girls.

Western liberal feminism is the ideology at the foundation of these texts. The central goal of liberal feminism is securing gender equality, and activism by liberal feminists often focuses on working to change legislation to gain rights for women, such as educational opportunities, equal pay, and reproductive choice. This philosophy is based on a belief that women experience shared oppression rather than concerned with examining difference, and it rallies around the idea that women's individual actions and decisions can secure their equal standing within society, even if that society is patriarchal. Deemed progressive and emancipatory by some, liberal feminism has also been criticised. In the past few decades, many feminists have sought to broaden the parameters of feminism from its liberal roots of identifying shared oppression, achieving equality, and celebrating women's unique contributions to society. From diverse theoretical positions, these feminists have worked broadly to identify ways in which various sociopolitical systems influence and construct gender; they have attempted to create a more nuanced understanding of difference within gender relations and women's experiences. For example, Black feminists such as bell hooks have argued that liberal feminism is preoccupied with the concerns of white, middle-class women and neglects issues of class and race.[4]

Postcolonial feminists have further developed such concerns. For instance, in relation to India, Chandra Talpade Mohanty objects to western feminist constructions of an essentialised "average Third World Woman" figure who does not reflect nuances of class, caste, region, religion, education level, or sexuality (21). This figure is positioned as leading "an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained)" and being "'Third World' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (21). Mohanty contends that this idea of the Third World Woman is set against "Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions" (21). Such imbalanced gender paradigms are problematic because the conceptual invocation of such binaries leads to essentialisation and precludes Third World Women from acting with agency. I adopt Mohanty's position in relation to girlhood in Indian children's novels, as similarly disturbing portrayals plague a number of texts under consideration here, resulting in a textual pattern whereby new Indian girls, with their agency that contrasts with other girls' passivity, seem superior to "Third World girls."

Indian women children's writers often perpetuate in their fiction a similar bifurcation between the new Indian girl figure and an inferior "Third World girl" figure. This may be due to what Deshpande and others have described as a strong relationship between women's writing in India and the influence of western feminism: Deshpande acknowledges that many Indian women writers, including herself, owe a debt to the women's movement in the west (*Writing from the Margins* 157–158).[5] Thus, I adopt Mohanty's position in relation to girlhood in Indian children's novels, as similarly disturbing portrayals plague a number of texts under consideration here, resulting in a textual pattern whereby middle-class new Indian girls, with their agency contrasting with other girls' passivity, seem superior to Third World girls of low class and caste.

Such stereotyped, disempowered Third World girl characters are set against new Indian girls with education and agency. In imagining gender equality but perpetuating existing class and caste structures, the portrayal of the new Indian girl is perhaps not as liberatory as it may initially seem. Sunder Rajan draws attention to how class inflects Indian children's literature, noting that as the purchasers of most books, middle-class, English-speaking Indian women through their market power influence children's writers to cater to their "liberal political preferences" and reflect "carefully progressive gender and secular positions " ("Fictions of Difference" 102). Similarly, the readers of these novels will also likely be middle-class girls who in reality may resemble or aspire to become like new Indian girls.

Sunder Rajan's insights can be extended and applied to most Indian women writers of children's novels, including those working in the diaspora, where the middle class has a similar stronghold on the production and consumption of these texts, as well as to the reception of these novels regardless of place of publication. This class position affects the portrayal of the new Indian girl by creating a narrow version of girlhood. As literary critic Viney Kirpal notes in her analysis of *The Girl Child in 20th Century Indian Literature* (1992),

> [T]here is one gaping hiatus in the portraits of this period. They do not depict the victimisation and violence upon the girl child in today's India. There is a telling silence about present day cruelties and oppressive practices that mar the life of the growing Indian girl. Depictions of emancipated girls are restricted to portrayals of girls from the upper/middle classes. (x)

She concludes that "[c]ontemporary literary depictions are progressive in an imitative, western way" (xii) and calls for a remedy to this erasure with a wider variety of portrayals of girls. Although she is discussing literature published for an adult audience, I share Kirpal's reservations. For the most part, the broader portrayals of girls she calls for remain similarly absent in the children's novels of Indian women writers. This problematic omission invests only urban, middle-class girls with the agency to affect positively their families, communities, and individual lives.

The New Indian Girl in Her Sociopolitical Context

In many ways, India seems to have embraced gender equality wholeheartedly. Not only does its constitution promise equal rights to all citizens; the nation was also led by a woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi, from 1966 through 1977, and then again from 1980 to 1984.[6] Further, many middle- and upper-class girls and women, particularly those living in urban areas, participate fully in educational opportunities and professional careers, apparently on equal ground with boys and men.

However, the situation is more complex than this evidence suggests. Not only is India primarily a patriarchal society, but some religious traditions have also designated inferior roles to women for millennia: Hindu doctrine in particular is frequently criticised for its role in perpetuating gender discrimination. Despite liberal legislation that officially ensures gender equality, widespread discrimination against females continues. For example, sociologist Mitra Bhadra argues that all Indian girls, regardless of class, caste, or region, experience some degree of gender discrimination (11). Therefore, even while a small minority of urban, middle-class girls may in reality experience the empowerment, agency, and equality portrayed in contemporary, English-language children's novels, the vast majority of other Indian girls actually face a multitude of obstacles not only to their equality but even to their survival.

For these millions of girls, the challenges are multitude: because they are considered inferior to and less valuable than boys, they face foeticide, infanticide, poor nutrition, and heavy workloads both inside and outside the home (Adarsh and Gopalkrishnan 29–37). If they survive into adolescence, many face child marriage and early pregnancy (Adarsh and Gopalkrishnan 38–39). Further, widespread sexual assault, rape, incest, and prostitution also plague many Indian girls (Adarsh and Gopalkrishnan 42). For many, education is an impossibility, and the percentage of Indian girls enrolled in schools is much lower than boys, although this is improving (Adarsh and Gopalkrishnan 34–36). It is difficult not to generalise about Indian girlhood, but this is a country that is geographically massive with a population of almost a billion. Clearly, there are many subtleties and gradations at play; for example, the situation is far different in Bihar, India's poorest state with the lowest literacy rate, than in Kerala, a traditionally matriarchal area which prioritises education for children of both sexes and boasts India's highest literacy rates. Broadly, though, Indian girls in low socioeconomic classes, in rural areas, and of low caste are particularly vulnerable.

Whereas the system of patriarchy is influential in that "patriarchal structures define all social discourse irrespective of caste and community backgrounds" (Jain 77), feminists and sociologists also believe that traditional belief systems perpetuate gender discrimination: "[t]here are certain myths regarding the low capabilities of girl child [*sic*] . . . stigmas and taboos attached to her" (Bhadra 12). In effect, the "conflict between tradition and modernity becomes in actuality one

between equality and inequality" (Jain 102). In particular, "The Laws of Manu" are frequently cited as problematic by and for many Indian feminists (Jain 127). The Laws of Manu, or *Manusmriti*, are set out in an ancient Sanskrit text that dictates correct social behaviour couched in Hindu religious doctrine (Jafa, "From Goddess to Prime Minister").[7] The text has circulated as an influential source of authority amongst Brahmins for millennia. The laws specify, for example, that women must always remain dependent on their male relatives and never seek independence, that education for females is inappropriate, as they are intellectually inferior to males, that women must unquestioningly worship their husbands as deities, and ultimately, that "she who, controlling her thoughts, speech, and acts, violates not her duty towards her lord, dwells with him (after death) in heaven, and in this world is called by the virtuous a faithful" (Manu). Thus, for many Indian feminists, tradition, both as a general entity and in its specific permutations, is perceived as a destructive force against which to struggle. "The Laws of Manu" provide simply one example of a frequently cited traditional, patriarchal cultural construct that exercises influence over gender relations in India. The Hindu religious foundations of precolonial India are often conflated with "tradition," although there were many other religious and cultural traditions active in the area; this kind of referencing contributes to a subtle Hinducentrism.

The influence of tradition on gender discrimination is strongly ingrained, helping to explain why it has persisted despite attempts to eradicate it spanning almost two centuries. Many Indian feminists believe that education is the key to nullifying the effects of traditional beliefs and securing equality for girls. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is a constant theme in the novels in this sample. Lobbying for improved legislation and publicity for girls has been a focus of many Indian feminist activists. In theory, great gains have been made in this area, such as in the National Policy on Education (1986 and 1992), which mandates universal enrollment of all children in elementary schools; the Universalisation of Girls' Education (1994 and 2000), which proposes that parents who prevent their daughters from attending school be fined or imprisoned; and the National Plan of Action for the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Decade of the Girl Child (1991–2000), which focuses on securing gender equality through health and education.

Of course, this legislation requires widespread enforcement, and this has been only partially successful to date. For example, as of the early 1990s only 61% of girls ages six to ten attended school (as opposed to 75% of boys in this range), a rate which dropped to 55% by ages eleven to fourteen (Velkoff 3). By the late 1990s, only 39% of Indian females were literate, as opposed to 67% of males (Madhok 292). Considering these realities for the majority of Indian girls, it is crucial to recognise that whereas the new Indian girl may have a specific referent in actual female children belonging to the middle classes of Delhi, Mumbai, and other major Indian cities, for the most part she is an imaginary figure presented as an aspirational model. In this sense, the portrayal of the new Indian girl is more utopian than realistic. These novels reflect some societal

realities while creating experimental literary portrayals of new possibilities for girls. In English-language children's novels by Indian women, the new Indian girl replaces the traditional Indian girl, and in doing so, these novels prescribe a new version of girlhood. In creating this portrayal, Indian women writers seem to be responding both to western liberal feminist theory and to traditional Indian literary texts which marginalised or excluded girls.

Indian Women Writers in Literary and Theoretical Context

In navigating this progressive yet incomplete portrayal of the new Indian girl, it is helpful to consider Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's approach to Indian women's writing, expressed in their Introduction to *Women Writing in India* (1993). They understand this writing "as *documents* that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency . . . at the margins of patriarchies" (39). They warn, however, that not all of this writing is specifically feminist in nature, and that even when it is, it can still perpetuate power imbalances:

> [O]pposition to the dominant ideologies of gender can be discomfitingly class or caste bound and draw on assumptions about race or religious persuasion that reinforce the hold of those ideologies. . . . Middle-class women, white women, upper-caste Hindu women, might find that their claims to "equality" or to the "full authority" of liberal individualism are at the expense of the working classes, the nonwhite races, dalits, or Muslims. (38)

Tharu and Lalita make a necessary distinction, and one that is also relevant to the novels under discussion here. Whereas the imagined new Indian girl in the children's novels does provide inspiration that girls can accomplish whatever they want to, there are also revealing gaps in the texts, just as there are in writing not aimed at children. As I have established and will delineate, particularly in regards to class and caste, there are disturbing fissures in some of these children's novels, and this lack is as important to recognise as the overall trend towards empowerment for girl characters.

In this context, the portrayal of the new Indian girl may be seen as a wish-fulfillment fantasy on the part of a small group of women with particular ideological goals. One of the most overarching ways by which the novels convey a feminist position is the creation of a central space for girl characters, a consistent feature which extends across genre and place of publication. Pat Pinsent recognises girl-centered children's novels that explore "the reality of being female" as feminist (*Children's Literature* 84). The fact that these qualities are present in the novels indicates that many are feminist children's novels.

In some genres, that space seems obvious and assured, as in girls' school stories such as *Summer Term at St. Avila's* (1994) by Swapna Dutta and

Growing Up (2000) by Devika Rangachari. In her examination of British school stories, Rosemary Auchmuty argues that girls' school stories, although critically denounced, are valuable because they portray a unique, all-female world and imagine possibilities for girls' achievements outside the domestic sphere (9–15). She further claims that school stories provide "literary proof that (middle-class) girls' education was at last being taken seriously" (80). These observations are relevant to many of the sample texts by women writers regardless of genre, as they imagine possibilities for girls' achievements, take girls' education seriously, and create a world populated if not exclusively, then at least equally, by girls and women.

The widespread presence of girl characters in central roles is itself an act of feminism, as their presence insists on their importance and points to their ability to participate actively and reciprocally in a variety of activities and relationships. Even if reading children's literature that is heavily populated with female characters now seems a commonplace reading experience, choosing to portray girl characters has actually been a major decision for many women writers. Until recently, western women authors often felt compelled to favour boy protagonists (Pinsent, *Children's Literature* 75). In the Indian context, the decision to focus on girl characters constitutes a significant act of feminism in and of itself, combating as it does traditional literature in which "[w]omen are deprived of the central role" (Jain 13), including the *Panchatantra*, in which the "girl child as the central character has been ignored completely" (Jafa, "Women in Children's" 1).

In *Musings on Indian Writing in English (Fiction)*, Sharda Iyer notes that in India "literature all along has been tuned to the point of view of the male element. Woman is often 'marginalized,' 'repressed' or 'silenced' in literary work" (80). Discussing the way women's writing for adults is beginning to counter this historical trend, Iyer recognises Shashi Deshpande as "one of the few Indian English writers who has portrayed the girl child with deliberation," recognising the significance of this contribution because in both "literary" and "social reality," girls "are a silent part of the family and society. What they think or feel about their social eclipse does not interest most writers or social thinkers" (80). Deshpande herself has been disturbed by this trend, despairing that "the picture presented by this literature [created by men] has been accepted as the true and the entire picture; women as well as men, have taken their idea of women from here" (*Writing from the Margins* 87).

To counter this tradition, Deshpande, along with many other Indian women writers, is creating what postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer has identified as "a liberatory . . . women's narrative" (203) through both children's and adults' novels. For these women writers, story provides a vehicle through which a girl character can "imagin[e] herself into autonomous being, abandoning the dependent, derivative position of the traditional daughter" (Boehmer 108). This is precisely the stand the new Indian girl takes. In doing so, she represents the figure best suited to contribute to contemporary Indian society.

The imagined new Indian girl in children's novels by Indian women writers counters traditional portrayals and questions traditional images of girls and women, replacing them with empowered girls as the new role models. As the quotation from Bhadra in the epigraph implies, Indian feminists are aware of the power of media to influence the actual status of Indian girls, and these children's novels are one of many forms of print media present in India and the diaspora.

Considering these sociohistorical and literary contexts, perhaps it is not surprising that Indian women writers imagine girl characters differently than do male writers in both India and the diaspora. For example, in the children's novels of the only two diasporic male writers, Bali Rai and Salman Rushdie, girls and women generally receive less attention than their male counterparts. They are rarely given the central place in male writers' texts, nor are they usually imagined as new Indian girls. Rai is a special case, however. In many ways, several of his works can be considered feminist, particularly in commitment to the feminist ideology that equal value be placed on all people, regardless of class, race, gender, or religion. The prominence of boy protagonists in Rai's work could possibly be explained by recognising that his writing emerged at a time in the United Kingdom during which there was a dearth of literature specifically for boys. He steps beyond this tendency in *Rani and Sukh* (2004), in which he imagines the characters of Rani and Parmy as new Indian girls who attempt to counter their families' destructive commitment to the past and tradition by pursuing fulfilling relationships, education, and careers.

In India, the empowerment of girl characters is almost exclusively the vision of women writers. Although there are exceptions such as Ranjit Lal's feminist novel *The Battle for No. 19* (2007), which features a group of strong girls cooperating to survive and help others in the 1984 Delhi riots, these are rare. Whereas some male authors simply exclude girl characters, as does Arup Kumar Dutta in his adventure-mystery novels such as *The Blind Witness* and *The Kaziranga Trail* (1995), other male authors include girls but focus central attention on boy characters. Another approach as problematic as exclusion occurs when male authors include girl characters yet objectify them. For example, in *Ladakh Adventure* (Dalal 2000), the first female character is introduced on page 66, and then she is judged not according to her impressive knowledge of local geography and social structures, but rather because she is "by far the prettiest of all the girls Vikram had met in Leh" (66). This description would be considered sexist rather than misogynistic by many feminists, but there are also indications of misogyny in several novels by male authors.

Misogynist attitudes often find expression through diction and characters' attitudes. For example, teenage boys in *Tin Fish* (2005) by Sudeep Chakravarti routinely employ the verb "to rape" to designate victory, as in this description of a character who has lost a tennis match: he "got raped by Rohu in front of what must have been half the school" (183). They also normalise their visits to prostitutes, as when one character tells others that he "laid a pross during

the hols. You buggers land up after prep and I'll tell you about it" (82). Characters also frequently objectify women as sexual objects, a practice clear in this reference to a popular film: "We thought it was a great movie, because her nipples would show when she had a bath in a sari. . . . [W]e were certain the whole hall, which was full of men, must have got hard-ons" (125). Such positioning of female characters fundamentally differs from the approaches typically used by women writers.

In fact, such containing, patriarchal portrayals seem to be precisely what many of the contemporary, English-language novels by Indian women authors challenge by refusing traditional images and unequal opportunities. For example, Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner* (2007) problematises the traditional belief that girls belong contained within the family home by addressing an extreme of this scenario: the case of Brahmin child widows in pre-Independence India. The protagonist Leela is compelled by traditional doctrine to "keep corner" by remaining inside her home for a year after she is widowed at the age of twelve. Even after the year ends, her subsequent life, as dictated by tradition, will be a segregated subsistence. She will be a social outcast and considered a burden on her family.

Sheth imagines an alternative outcome for Leela, thereby refusing the script of patriarchal tradition. After an epiphany in which she realises that "I could be like Saviben [the teacher] and help other girls" (146), Leela becomes a new Indian girl by leaving home, furthering her education, and becoming a teacher. In doing so, she becomes socially connected in meaningful interrelationships and contributes to improving her community. Jafa notes that in traditional children's literature the identities of females were tied to the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, and women's most important tasks were "to bring up valiant sons" and to uphold tradition ("Women in Children's" 2). By contrast, contemporary women authors such as Sheth re-write the traditional stories to foreground girls' and women's education, paid work outside the home, and social contributions to community.

Interdependence: The New Indian Girl's Value System

Not only do these novels create a central space for girls and portray new Indian girls who act with agency, but they are also shaped with a female value system that emphasises care, cooperation, and interdependence. Feminist psychologists have argued that female value systems are shaped by these principles, whereas male value systems tend to emphasise individuation, competition, and autonomy.[8] Even when individuation becomes a focus in these Indian children's novels, such as in some of the diasporic texts which focus on identity development, the importance of interrelationships is central. It is important to view this feminine value system in the Indian context, as in Indian feminism "the claim for equality at no stage has been based on the acquisition of male strength or

of masculine virtues" but instead "uses tradition for reinterpreting space and redefining relationships and even the process of individuation is embedded in these relationships" (Jain 127). Similarly, in a discussion of gender in Shashi Deshpande's novels, Iyer observes that the maturation and individuation of Indian girls is enmeshed in and complicated by their relationships with and duty towards their families (79). Duty is a central concept in the novels, and one which extends beyond girls. This could be due to the fact that Hindu society was traditionally structured around the idea of *dharma*, which required each person to do her or his duty; learning to do one's duty was an important component of the *niti* taught in the *Panchatantra*. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that literary critics identify a pattern by which girls find a balance between not only tradition and modernity, but also self and duty. These are also crucial tasks for the new Indian girls in these novels.

In the children's novels I am discussing, new Indian girl characters rarely act entirely autonomously, and rather than rejecting family and community interrelationships in favour of individual development or passively accepting these relationships, new Indian girls work from within these relationships and also affect them. In doing so, they "[confirm] the importance of interrelationships," which Trites contends is an important component of feminist children's literature (*Waking Sleeping Beauty* 98). If traditional Indian girls were dependent, then new Indian girls are interdependent, influencing as well as influenced by a multitude of relationships. Indian women writers create feminist texts for children when their novels celebrate interrelationships that imagine what girls can accomplish when they work interdependently with friends, family, and community members of both sexes. A striking example of this pattern emerges in Jamila Gavin's *The Wheel of Surya* (1992), in which Marvinder, a young girl, acts with strength and agency when she sets out across India with her younger brother in her care to reunite her family after it is sundered by Partition. She eventually succeeds, helped along the way by strangers and family members of both sexes.

In fact, even when women writers opt to focus on boy protagonists, they often foreground the importance of interdependence. This is particularly true of works of fantasy, such as Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *The Conch Bearer* (2003). Divakaruni foregrounds issues of community, cooperation, and interrelationships by portraying the protagonist Anand, a young boy, achieving success and making decisions within interrelationships. During Anand's quest to return a magical conch to the mysterious "Brotherhood," he works together with a girl to succeed, and Nisha subsequently becomes the first girl to join the Brotherhood. When Anand later tries to decide whether to join the Brotherhood, whose mandate is to help those in need, he recognises that by joining he will be able to help a multitude of people, which is tempting.

In order to join, however, he is required to separate himself permanently from his family, which both seems morally wrong and feels emotionally painful to him. As he struggles with his decision, his mentor asks him, "If you

really want to help, where do you think you can help more people? Here, after you develop your gifts, or at home with your family?" (Divakaruni 247). Anand understands that he has a great deal to contribute to society by becoming part of the Brotherhood, but he still feels the pull of his responsibility to his family; he believes he "can't stay here while" his "family is so sad over there" (247). Only when his mentor promises to alter his family's memories magically so that they will be unaware of his disappearance does Anand agree to stay. In doing so, he chooses to become integrated within the community of the Brotherhood, where he has the opportunity to contribute to society significantly, over his more limited role in the family. Anand's recognition that he can only be comfortable with this path if his family is not hurt by it emphasises the centrality of the family relationship. Divakaruni illustrates how complicated this decision is. Anand's guide convinces him that he will "no longer" be "someone's son, someone's brother" and that "to be one of the Brotherhood is to give up all other relationships and loves" and finally gain "Yourself" (248).

Anand's decision, though, is obviously not based on a desire to gain autonomy or simply to develop as an individual. He is motivated by the chance to become part of a larger group than his family, and to help society at the broadest possible level. The tension Anand feels in attempting to negotiate these complicated interrelationships between self, family, and society, is typical of the dilemmas experienced by many new Indian girls. Although new Indian girl characters' interdependent positions are demonstrated to be beneficial to themselves and others, interrelationships can clearly also be a source of strife.

Family and community members, particularly women, not only support and care for girls but also resist their attempts to become new Indian girls. Sheth explores this paradox in *Keeping Corner.* Forced by her relatives to behave according to strict Hindu behavioural codes, newly widowed Leela begins to consider traditional customs and roles for women from a logical and moral perspective informed by liberalism. Each time she does, she intellectually rejects the behaviour or custom in question and attempts to act accordingly. However, some of her female relatives force her to comply with traditional behavioural expectations and actively resist her attempts to become a new Indian girl, even while other women, such as her teacher, aid in the process. As a new Indian girl, Leela begins to question tradition and subsequently rejects it after wondering, "Who started this? And why? Can anyone benefit from it?" (59). Every custom related to widowhood is designed to strip Leela of both her femininity and her contributions to society, which together compose a significant portion of what she understands and experiences as her selfhood. Indubitably she would not enjoy such a situation. However, it is remarkable that she takes action against it despite intense social pressure. Sheth herself, who explains in her Author's Note that she based *Keeping Corner* on her aunt's real life experiences, designates this protest an act of "tremendous courage" (280), particularly when she must stand up to her own family.

Insistence on the importance of interrelationships is a powerful way in which Indian women writers both respect and rewrite tradition in their children's novels. Girls rarely act entirely independently, nor do they usually reject their families. Rather, they remain engaged in a web of interrelationships that is both supportive and threatening, simultaneously honoring traditional familial and community relationships and liberating themselves into social roles premised on gender equality. By demonstrating the ways in which traditional social structures, such as interrelationships in families and communities, can be both sources of restriction and empowerment, they imagine a transformed state of balance for new Indian girls better suited to contemporary national values.

Becoming a New Indian Girl

Whereas I have so far drawn attention to several parallels across the texts, there is also a great deal of variety in the ways new Indian girls act to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. Some are assigned the status of new Indian girls at the narrative's outset: they are loved, well-fed, physically competent, secure, obtaining an education, able to take initiative, and supported and respected by both parents. Thus, they are in a position to expend their energy either by helping others to become new Indian girls and/or by improving their communities. For these girls, gender equality is a given. It is normalised. For example, all girl protagonists in the diasporic novels with western settings by Indian women writers begin from this assured position as new Indian girls (all are middle-class). In India, every central girl character in adventure-mystery stories, school stories, and fantasies by women writers also begin from this position (again, all are middle-class).

In other novels, girl protagonists tackle their own tradition-bound gender inequality head-on as the central narrative conflict: they *become* new Indian girls. This becoming can take a multitude of forms, but it is always middle- or upper-class girls who succeed in becoming new Indian girls. They may seek to secure educational opportunities, as do Vinita in *The Year I Turned 16* (Khanna 2006), Jeeta in *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet* (Sheth 2006), and Leela in *Keeping Corner*. They may insist on participating in activities that have been traditionally designated male, as when Sara trains a racehorse in *Race to Win* (2004) by Loveleen Kacker and Naima learns to paint rickshaws in *Rickshaw Girl* (Perkins 2007). They may overcome their unwanted status within their families, which Puja in *The Battle for No. 19* (Lal 2007) accomplishes by impressing her father with her archery skills. Whatever the challenge, new Indian girls are always triumphant in overcoming it.

Whereas narratives that imagine girls taking initiative and acting with agency to become new Indian girls by obtaining education and pursuing gender equality can provide inspiration and demonstrate that gender equality

may be attainable, the relentless positioning of the new Indian girl as middle-class can also be seen as oppressive. The frequent omission or distortion of class and caste struggles in the quest to become a new Indian girl is a disturbing trend. It is also problematic that even when Indian women writers attempt to include low-caste girls or those from outside the middle class, they often do so in a token manner that perpetuates stereotypes and ultimately maintains a hegemonic order in which the powerful middle and upper Indian classes define the parameters of existence for others. In this context, it is imperative that all girls become new Indian girls. However, Third World girls are unable to initiate this transformation and must instead wait to be rescued from their unenlightened states by middle-class new Indian girls. A closer analysis of *Keeping Corner* will demonstrate the ways this model is successful in positioning the new Indian girl as a valuable member of Indian society, whereas an examination of *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* (2000) by Radha Padmnabhan exposes its shortcomings.

Leela from *Keeping Corner* is the epitome of the new Indian girl. She struggles to achieve her own personal transformation by escaping a contained, domestic existence and contributing to her nation professionally as a teacher. She also becomes involved in Gandhi's freedom movement. Thus, the setting of *Keeping Corner*, on the cusp of Indian Independence, only emphasises the new Indian girl's nation-building role.

Through her own logic and inspired by Gandhi's ideas, Leela adopts a liberal rather than traditional Hindu value system and approach to life. Forced by her relatives to behave according to strict Hindu behavioural codes, she begins to consider traditional patriarchal Hindu customs and roles for women from a logical and moral perspective informed by liberalism. As a new Indian girl, Leela begins to question tradition and subsequently rejects it after wondering, "Who started this? And why? Can anyone benefit from it?" (59). Eventually she decides she must try to resist tradition: "I realised that this was just a made-up rule, and something inside of me snapped. 'I don't want to follow this custom.'" (59). She begins to rebel against the outmoded customs that literally hold her prisoner.

Significantly, Leela does not conceive of herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as connected with a societal whole once she begins to understand her position as part of the larger condition of child widows, widows in general, and ultimately women's roles in Indian society. As she becomes familiar with Gandhi's progressive, modern views on women's changing roles in India, Leela begins to recognise as unjust traditional social and religious requirements that illogically dictate women's behavior. She rails against her family, dissatisfied with their flimsy insistence that this is simply the way things have always been. Whereas Leela initially believes her social position is non-negotiable due to her fate or *kismet* and the ferocious strength of society versus her own apparent impotence, she later comes to understand that her actions can make a difference in changing her life. In reading the newspaper

daily, as well as undertaking other reading for her schoolwork, she becomes familiar with the philosophical values and protest work of activists, including Gandhi, who are leading the struggle to emancipate women in India—as well as India itself. In turn, Leela then recognises that her individual actions can affect her entire society. With the help of others such as her teacher and her brother, Leela not only acts with agency to fulfill her goals, she also realises that she can contribute to modernizing Indian society.

In *Keeping Corner*, the conflation of national progress and gender equality is clearly demonstrated as Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is consistently shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints. She frequently uses his principles and arguments to support her own. For instance, she confronts her father by saying, "Gandhiji thinks widows should be able to go to school. . . . What good are all [his] ideas if widows and their families don't take the lead? Ba, I want to study, and I need your help" (236). Eventually, her father recognises that "this is not just about Leela, it is also about something bigger" (246–247) and assents. The new Indian girl as a collective *is* about something bigger: changing social roles for Indian females, roles that ultimately serve a national agenda. Thus, in their own small ways, Leela and other fictional new Indian girl characters create a ripple effect that conceptually expands the boundaries not only of girlhood but also of what constitutes the Indian nation. Contemporary women authors such as Sheth re-write traditional Indian stories to foreground girls' and women's education, paid work outside the home, and social contributions to community—all important activities in postcolonial India.

With the help of her teacher and several of her relatives, Leela, like many girl protagonists in other novels by Indian women writers, tackles her own tradition-bound gender inequality head-on as the central narrative conflict: she *becomes* a new Indian girl. This becoming can take a multitude of forms, but it is always middle- or upper-class girls, like Leela, who seek to become new Indian girls. They may strive to secure educational opportunities or insist on participating in activities that have been traditionally designated male, and they always succeed. Leela is portrayed as becoming inspired by Gandhi and later goes on to participate in the freedom movement in India. She clearly represents a new way of being for Indian girls, but her opportunity is enabled by her class status. For example, her brother is willing and able to pay for the higher education that qualifies her to become a teacher, allowing her to succeed. What of girls who lack such social and economic support?

It is disturbing that none of the novels in this sample are focalised from the point of view of a low-caste girl, or one from outside of the urban middle or upper classes. The few token girls portrayed as secondary characters from low-caste or -class groups rely on middle-class new Indian girls to rescue them from inequality, and during this process they are rarely consulted about their own goals, nor do they take initiative or make decisions for themselves. The result of such interactions is that low-caste girls such as Kupi in *Suchitra and*

the Ragpicker come to represent an imagined "Third World girl," one who is passive, dependent, and inferior (as well as generally underdeveloped as a fictional character). This Third World girl is a blight on modern Indian society, reflecting poorly on its progress, and she must be transformed into the kind of new Indian girl who successfully combines tradition and modernity. New Indian girls, as rescuers, are portrayed as heroic saviors, inviting admiration. It is clear that ideologically, their behaviour is correct. The new Indian girl's motivation to help other girls access education and achieve gender equality is to be celebrated. Characters such as Suchitra fulfill the heroic role of new Indian girl by acting to improve their communities through empowering other girls to become new Indian girls and by converting or overcoming those who oppose such progress. They not only participate in the project of transforming restriction to empowerment, they actually initiate it.

In *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* the rescue motif comprises the central narrative. It is telling that Suchitra, a middle-class girl and the protagonist, is named in the title while the girl she purports to "save" is known only by her social position. Suchitra becomes inspired to rescue "a dirty ragpicker" from her present-day suburb of New Delhi when she glances out her window to see the girl sifting through the garbage "with poetry in her movement and a spring in her step" (9). Kupi, the ragpicker girl, is described with the baffling combination of being "so ragged and so dirty" and yet "so cheerful" (11). Suchitra demands of her mother "one good reason why she should not go to school like me" and becomes compelled to help the girl even though "she hadn't the faintest idea what she was going to do" (13).

Suchitra begins to gain an understanding of the complexity of Kupi's situation when her teacher explains that "[i]n a country like ours, many parents are so poor that they send their children to work" (18). She welcomes her teacher's suggestion to find a way to send Kupi to school. However, this solution is demonstrated to be overly simplistic when Suchitra learns that Kupi is both an orphan and a virtual slave to a local man who forces her to collect garbage and keeps the money she earns. It seems impossible for Kupi to become educated and begin the journey towards becoming a new Indian girl—clearly an intolerable situation.

As she strives to enact change, Suchitra encounters significant resistance to her new Indian girl value system. Her friends initially wonder at her beliefs: "You sure have funny ideas, Suchi. I have often seen children rummage in these bins, too, but never really paid them any attention" (11), and her mother warns her not to "get agitated" or to "think of" Kupi (13). Later, though, her parents accept Suchitra's determination to help Kupi, and they begrudgingly support her: her mother both "admire[s] Suchitra" and "wonder[s] why Suchitra couldn't behave like an ordinary little girl" (31). Clearly, the new Indian girl in her transformative mode is a novelty, but also ultimately admirable: when Suchitra's father later reluctantly admits that he is "proud of her," her mother concurs (33). Her final point of resistance comes in the form of the man who

controls Kupi, whom she later learns kidnapped Kupi (and other children) in infancy. While she is unable to convert his belief system, Suchitra manages to overcome him, too, by enlisting the help of her friends and the police.

Once Kupi and the other children are safe—saved—Suchitra's parents and teacher decide she "deserves a reward" for helping Kupi, and Suchitra uses the opportunity to attempt to do something of the utmost importance to most new Indian girls: deepen her interrelationships. Suchitra wishes her family would "adopt Kupi and give me a sister" (61). Instead, her teacher adopts the girl. This adult authority figure will attempt to find Kupi's parents, but if she cannot, she intends to raise Kupi and take responsibility for her education. Thus, the outcome Suchitra had initially hoped for, that Kupi would be able to attend school, is circuitously achieved by the novel's resolution, and as a bonus a beggar master has been brought down, numerous children have been freed from his bondage, and they have the chance to be reunited with their families. Suchitra's concern for another little girl's welfare has a very high payoff—her community is immeasurably improved. The Indian nation is a better place in that it more closely resembles the liberal, modern goals of the Indian constitution. Acting as a true new Indian girl, Suchitra has transformed restriction to empowerment, and her actions have positively affected a multitude of people. She has succeeded in modernizing her tiny corner of postcolonial India.

Despite its uplifting message, there are problematic stereotypes at play in *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*. Not only is Kupi a consistently passive, dependent girl, but also the class and caste rift between Suchitra and Kupi is broad, and it is clearly implied that Suchitra's subject position as a new Indian girl is valuable and right, while Kupi's, as a Third World girl, is marred. Whereas as a new Indian girl Suchitra attempts to treat Kupi as an equal, it is always clear that they are *not* equal: Kupi is low-caste, and thus she is inferior.

Equally disturbing is the fact that Kupi's physical attractiveness is the quality that initially compels Suchitra's attention. It is difficult to understand why Suchitra would be more inspired by a cheerful ragpicker child than a miserable, downtrodden one. It is also unlikely that a malnourished, abused child such as Kupi would move gracefully rather than with exhaustion. Indeed, in *A Summer Adventure* the children feel "very sorry" for Shanta because she has "a very dirty little face," "torn clothes," and "timid" eyes, which make her appear "a real scarecrow" (Deshpande 27). In contrast, the poetry in Kupi's movements and her large-eyed face make her an exotic, stereotyped figure, and it is troubling that only her physical attractiveness marks her as valuable enough to help.

Whereas narratives such as *Keeping Corner*, which imagine girls taking initiative and acting with agency to become new Indian girls by obtaining education and pursuing gender equality can provide inspiration and demonstrate that gender equality may be attainable, the relentless positioning of the new Indian girl as middle-class can also be seen as oppressive. The frequent omission or distortion of class and caste struggles in the quest to become a new

Indian girl is a disturbing trend, as demonstrated by *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*. It is also problematic that even when Indian women writers attempt to include low-caste girls or those from outside the middle class, they often do so in a token manner that perpetuates exoticisation and/or stereotypes and ultimately maintains a hegemonic order in which the powerful middle and upper Indian classes define the parameters of existence for others. In this context, it is imperative that all girls become new Indian girls. However, Third World girls are unable to initiate this transformation and must instead wait to be rescued from their unenlightened states by middle-class new Indian girls.

As imagined by Indian women writers in many English-language children's novels, the new Indian girl is a savior: in emancipating herself and others and pursing gender equality, she transforms herself and her community, ultimately providing a valuable contribution to postcolonial India by creating an empowered balance between tradition and modernity. She symbolises a new way of being not only for Indian girls, but also for the Indian nation. However, this aspirational vision is not without its flaws, as evidenced by the fact that in fiction she is called into the service of hegemonic social structures. Novels featuring the new Indian girl tend to oversimplify class and caste issues, and she is associated with a prescriptive ideology; often these characteristics negate the very equality that the ideals of the new Indian girl seem to seek. As a result, the new Indian girl can also be a bully. As in the nation itself, in English-language Indian children's novels gender equality has not yet come to full fruition.

Imagining Solidarity

It is impossible to argue with the idea that all girls deserve to be educated. However, when middle-class girls are consistently portrayed as heroic saviors of low-caste girls, a skewed balance of power can result. Writing that features the new Indian girl can unwittingly perpetuate a larger hegemonic structure. But there are exceptions to this pattern. For instance, to some degree, *Younguncle in the Himalayas* (2005) by Vandala Singh succeeds in imagining a more empowered possibility for Dulati, another ragged, low-caste little girl, although the narrative is not focalised from her point of view. Whereas Dulati's story line is one of the lesser threads in the novel, Singh demonstrates how one seemingly inconsequential girl's fate is connected with a whole community's well-being, and rather than a concerted effort to rescue her, a significant improvement in Dulati's well-being comes about as a result of a holistic approach to community harmony, which is secured by the involvement of dozens of characters of all backgrounds both inside and outside its social structure. *Younguncle in the Himalayas* explores the disastrous consequences of corruption, greed, competition, and environmental degradation—in other words, the results of a male value

system—and demonstrates that these can be overcome with a female value system that utilises cooperation and interdependence.

To counter this destruction of the small village of Lasaul, Singh imagines a group of concerned individuals from all classes and castes, including animals, working together to expose the corruption that endangers the villagers. This focus emphasises that young or old, male or female, human or animal, each individual's actions are significant to eliciting an outcome that will benefit the community. The focus here is not the new Indian girl per se, but empowered girls and women do work together with boys and men actively throughout the novel, and the text positions interrelationships as the foundation of community harmony.

In this way, the value system in *Younguncle in the Himalayas* resembles the concept of "solidarity" that Chandra Talpade Mohanty devises to counterbalance an oversimplified liberal feminist approach. She defines "solidarity" as "the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities," that instead of "assuming an enforced commonality of oppression . . . foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected" (7). Within this very different context of solidarity, Dulari is rescued.

As in *Suchitra and the Ragpicker,* there is a distinct contrast set up between the middle-class central characters and the impoverished villagers with whom they work to enact change. In *Younguncle in the Himalayas*, though, the contrast is shown as false or problematic, because it is voiced through the antagonist, the odious, corrupt developer Daalmakhni, and readers can easily glean that his views must be erroneous. Because the villagers resist his corrupt methods of property development, he designates them "stupid people . . . who refuse to be pushed into the 21st century" (Singh 60). By consistently disregarding the villagers' values, lifestyle, and basic human rights, Daalmakhni is set up as an evil force that must be resisted. Younguncle feels compelled to help the villagers to free themselves from Daalmakhni, and his entire family, children included, participate. They work together with local people from all classes and castes in conjunction with the villagers.

The villagers' position is symbolically represented by Dulari, a young girl who captures the children's attention. When they are introduced to "a small wisp of a figure, a ghost of a girl who stood trembling in the doorway, wearing a ragged brown shirt that reached almost to her ankles" with a "face . . . mostly occupied by enormous dark eyes," a "Rat-girl" who is "like a wild animal" (47), the family feels sorry for her, calling her a "Poor Child" and wondering "How does she live?" (49). The Rat-girl, Dulari, is a hard-working servant at the hotel where the family is holidaying, and as well as doing domestic labour, she also plays her flute to drive rats out of the building. Through inquiring about Dulari, they also gain information about the nearby village of Lasaul and Daalmakhni's harmful actions. The children's and Younguncle's interest in Dulari's welfare

catalyses a series of change, and many people become invested in Lasaul's welfare. As a result, Daalmakhni's nefarious intentions are eventually thwarted, and the village is not destroyed. Instead, it returns to health and becomes again a self-sustainable community and home for all villagers.

Younguncle in the Himalayas demonstrates both the rightness of solidarity and the interconnectedness of relationships when the contributions of so many different people combine to help the villagers and Dulari. The celebration feast that concludes the narrative highlights this, as people of all backgrounds, as well as animals, are invited: "Younguncle and his family were, of course, invited. Naren, Tanuja, and Dulari were also present, as was the postman. So were the langurs and some of the spiritualists. . . . Sapna Devi and the other villagers welcomed them with open arms" (133). Solidarity is reinforced when, during the feast,

> Dulari, as a low-caste child, had never before eaten with the upper-caste villagers and at first couldn't bring herself to put even a morsel in her mouth. But between Tanuja and Sapna Devi feeding her with their own hands, she felt like a queen and ate an enormous meal. (134)

The contributions of each person in the group are celebrated when Dulari is invited to participate in the evening's entertainment: "she pulled out her old bamboo flute and stunned her audience with melodious tunes that echoed in the hills around them"; her music enthralls not only the human guests, but also "[w]ild animals" that the villagers welcome when they "sat at the edge of the forest—monkey and leopard, porcupine and deer, birds of wondrous plumage and the ubiquitous rats of Pine-Away—all held in thrall by the throbbing sweetness of the flute"(135). It is significant that Dulari's unique ability is validated at the conclusion of *Younguncle in the Himalayas*. In this way, Singh resists a normative iteration of the new Indian girl. Instead, Dulari is valued for who she is. Her previously undervalued skills are not expunged but rather celebrated, and she becomes the focus of the feast. In a final gesture of solidarity, even the rats themselves are welcome at the feast.

I have only begun to touch on the ways in which the ideology of the new Indian girl inflects these novels. Throughout subsequent chapters it will continue to be apparent, as the majority of the texts are underpinned with this liberal feminist value system, and the central presence of girls, the importance of interrelationships, and the new Indian girl's desire to enact transformation shape many of the narratives and affect the ways nation, bicultural identity, and girlhood are imagined and performed.

Chapter Three
Imagining Unity in Diversity through Cooperation and Friendship

> Unity in diversity thus is not a contemporary social reality. It probably reflects the best of [Indian] cultural aspirations. What is more, it is a precondition, in the present context, to our achieving a peaceable society in the midst of plurality. If unity in diversity does not exist, we must make every effort to bring it about.
>
> (**Gore 178**)

> Everything is possible. . . . For India to achieve all the goals outlined in this book, and more, all it requires is concerted effort by the people of India, especially the youth who form more than fifty per cent of the population. A major mission-oriented programme needs teamwork.
>
> (**Abdul Kalam 95**)

Narrative Reliance on Cooperation

As I have shown, Indian women writers draw attention in their children's novels to the importance of relationships in girls' lives, demonstrating the power and interconnectedness of these relationships on the personal, familial, and societal levels. New Indian girl characters in texts from both India and the diaspora learn that their actions affect others, and they also experience the effects of interrelationships, often advantageously.

While many new Indian girls are concerned with establishing their own selfhood in terms of securing education or coming to terms with their identities, they also cooperate with others to enact transformation at the personal and community levels, often in ways that improve the nation. Further, their friendships are portrayed as sources of power in the texts, particularly as a means to overcome divisive differences. In fact, friendship and cooperation are

central, often related, motifs utilised not only by women authors of contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels, but also by male authors: these motifs are present in most genres both in India and the diaspora and are enacted by both boy and girl characters. It seems likely that most readers encountering a selection of these texts would be struck by the abundance of intercultural friendships portrayed and by the consistent, integral use of cooperation by characters to resolve narrative conflicts, as both are shown to be powerful, highly effective means to create change.

Although the social strategies regarding friendship and cooperation imagined in the novels in this sample are oversimplified and very likely overly optimistic in their suggestions, an approach that I flag as potentially problematic elsewhere, in this case the approach is effective. The power of this approach stems from the way it offers models and mindsets that create an atmosphere in which social transformation could flourish. Considering the social and political challenges facing Indians in India, and the sociocultural problems Indians may face when they relocate to the west, such as racism, the texts offer suggestions that, while oversimplified, do have applicability to the real world and could build the foundation for eventual change. Further, they are developmentally appropriate to children and model social behaviour that children could actually adopt in reality to eliminate xenophobia and violence, and to transform their lives and relationships on the personal level, which could eventually affect a larger societal realm.

I will consider first the use of cooperation before moving on to examine the ways the texts position friendship as the solution, on the individual level, to racism and xenophobia. By "cooperation," I mean the act of various people working together for a common purpose, or to secure a mutually beneficial result. Most readers of contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels would likely interpret this foregrounding of cooperation as well suited to children's literature, as a variety of genres in children's literature rely on this narrative structure, notably the fantasy quest, and thus it would likely resonate as familiar. In their structural similarity to other works of children's fantasy, fantasies from this sample, such as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie 1990), *The Conch Bearer* (Divakaruni 2003), *The Buggles* (2001) by Antara Ganguli, and *Amie and the Chawl of Colour* (2004) by Chatura Rao, also use cooperation in ways common to children's literature. This use of cooperation might further seem appropriate in children's cultural productions due to its similarity with contemporary attitudes towards childhood, as in reality cooperation is frequently inculcated in children's scholastic and athletic pursuits, as well as in children's literature, and this trend is not restricted to the west. Therefore, the consistent presence of cooperation across a wide range of texts seems normal. But whereas cooperation may seem almost synonymous with childhood, this apparently normal behaviour is actually a cultivated social value.

Especially in the Indian context, its foundations are complex. Although as I have already established that it is possible to view cooperation as part of

a female value system, as competition is often considered integral to a male value system, in these novels its use brings to mind more multi-faceted influences than feminism alone. Two of the best-known Indian political leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, both encouraged Indians to lay aside their many differences and work together towards two common goals: emancipating themselves from British rule and shaping a new, egalitarian India. Today, prominent Indians such the scientist and former president A. P. J. Abdul Kalam1 encourage Indian children to cooperate to create a better future as a developed (as opposed to developing) country, a position indicated in the epigraph. Abdul Kalam outlines a detailed plan which to achieve this in *Mission India: A Vision for Indian Youth* (2005),[2] which I discuss further in Chapter 4. In diasporic communities in the west, Indians may also rely on cooperation in order to establish social and cultural infrastructure in a new environment. Further, within the multicultural societies of the United Kingdom and North America, Indian children must cooperate in work and play with children of all backgrounds in schools and communities.

Perhaps reflecting these realities, perhaps an imaginary, aspirational vision of social harmony, the use of cooperation by child characters in solving narrative conflict is one of the most striking values apparent in these children's novels, and its varied permutations reflect a multitude of influences (including genre conventions specific to children's literature, as I have established). I have already discussed the ways Indian women writers encourage a cooperative mode in their novels, but I also recognise the influence of Gandhian and Nehruvian philosophies in the texts: these are sometimes flagged by authors through specific references to Gandhi or Nehru, but are more often present more subtly in ideology. The use of cooperation in the texts has a basis that may be moral, in that it is related to a feminist value system, spiritual, in that it reflects Gandhi's belief in the interconnectedness of all people, and/or political, in that it reflects Nehru's certainty that national progress, strength, and harmony could be enabled by "unity in diversity." These moral, spiritual, and political dimensions of cooperation in the children's novels are often inseparable, although for clarity I explore each separately.

The use of cooperation by child characters is portrayed as unfailingly successful in these novels. Although this may seem a naively optimistic device of children's literature, it also shares some basis in reality. In recent Indian history the use of cooperation has elicited extraordinary results, such as achieving Independence. On the other hand, competing communal interests have elicited horrific results, such as Hindu-Muslim conflicts during Partition that left approximately a million Indians dead.[3] Since in the complex, sometimes hostile, Indian sociopolitical context, cooperation seems indispensable and its alternatives seem redoubtable, it is difficult to take anything other than a celebratory stance towards its presence in the children's novels in this sample.

However, its implementation in these novels is also problematic, as they are plagued by the portrayal of predominantly middle-class characters

cooperating to effect positive change. This again may have some basis in reality, as part of Abdul Kalam's "vision for Indian youth," which may be seen as representative of a hegemonic value system, involves a pledge on the part of the English-speaking implied child readers of the plan to "teach at least ten persons who cannot read or write to do so" and to "constantly endeavour to remove the pain of my suffering brethren" while refusing to "support any religious, caste or language differentiation" (102). This implicitly hierarchical approach to transformation is similar to the one promoted by Gandhi, who believed that it was the duty of higher-caste Indians to take responsibility for the welfare of the lower castes.

In the contemporary novels, children remain enmeshed in such social hierarchies. It is usually empowered, middle-class child characters who work together in the novels to address various problems and concerns, including those similar to the ones outlined by Abdul Kalam: these classes alone possess the agency that allows them to recognise and act upon problems. However, these characters also frequently elicit the support and aid of a wide variety of child and adult family and community members, sometimes including members of low castes or classes, highlighting the advantages of group effort.

The Hidden Treasure (Deshpande 2006) portrays such an approach. The novel clearly showcases the moral foundations and consequences of cooperation, while hinting at the interconnectedness of all people in a way that could be interpreted as spiritual or Gandhian. Characters of many ages and backgrounds work together to solve a mystery and a crime: middle-class siblings Dinu, Minu, and Polly, along with their urbanite cousin Ravi, combine forces with Satish, a poor village boy distantly related to their non-blood aunt, to find their paternal family's ancient treasure. Although plagued by stereotypes, the characters in this novel do surmount their diverse social, geographic and economic backgrounds to pursue a shared goal, which they achieve by cooperating. Near the end of the narrative, the children become trapped in a dangerous situation, and they are helped by members of a nomadic tribal group, by their uncle, and by other local adults as well. Children do not act alone: many members of their community, including adults, combine forces. This cooperation in pursuit of a worthy goal by the children, and the widespread investment in the well-being of the children by the adults, draws attention to both the ability and necessity of every member of the group to contribute to the cause.

Indeed, this principle is foregrounded when the children recognise that although they took the initiative in the situation, they were able to succeed only because "[e]veryone helped" and "[e]ach did his bit" (252). Not only can each person contribute to the goal, regardless of background or ability, but also everyone benefits collectively as well, emphasising the idea that people are essentially interconnected. In *The Hidden Treasure*, this shared benefit is superficially a feast produced by the adults to thank the children and the tribals for their involvement. On a more profound level, the treasure they find is

donated to benefit the community, rather than remaining in the children's family: "That's our real reward. We were trying hard to get some money for a new school building. Now . . . [t]he kids will have a brand new school building" (258). Ultimately, despite the fact that they did not act alone, this collective social benefit is attributed to the children's actions: "'And all,' Kaka smiled at them affectionately, 'because of you'" (259).

These general principles, that children's agency and their use of cooperation ensure a positive outcome, and that these behaviours are necessary because everyone is interconnected, are promoted to some degree or another in almost all texts published in India, regardless of the specificity of the central conflict portrayed. Indeed, even if humans do not directly benefit, cooperation is still positioned as a useful, powerful strategy for achieving positive change. For example, several of Arup Kumar Dutta's adventure stories focus on the human need to protect the environment through connections with animals. In *The Kaziranga Trail* (1995), three village boys defeat corruption and protect the web of life in the Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary by aiding in the discovery and capture of a ring of rhinoceros poachers whose crimes are enabled by a corrupt forest ranger. The boys work closely with one another and in conjunction with the adults to achieve this purification of the Sanctuary, which is framed in the narrative as a crucial, life-and-death battle.

There is a political element here as well: the poaching is enabled by the corruption of a minor official. Throughout contemporary, English-language children's novels published in India, fighting corruption through cooperation is portrayed as a necessary and glorious pursuit. This theme is echoed in a startling number of novels, although the children's texts tend on the whole to be morally oversimplified. For example, police and government officials are often (although not always) upheld as virtuous, despite realities to the contrary in India, and they frequently cooperate with child characters to enact positive change.

The extremely wealthy often provide safer textual vehicles to embody corruption. In Ranjit Lal's *Bossman and the Kala Shaitan* (2005), four (middle-class) siblings and their dog work together to expose the crimes of the evil Bollywood actor and producer Azghar Khanna, whom the rest of society considers a hero. The children, however, astutely suspect otherwise and heroically endanger themselves while bringing him to justice when they realise that he is killing the local dogs for sport (by forcing them to fight with his pet panther). In this text, interconnectedness is shown in the children's bond with animals. They become determined to expose Khanna's crimes, which he perpetuates relatively openly because "people like Azghar Khanna had ways and means of sliming around the law" (65). This state of corruption is portrayed as intolerable and is duly exterminated by the police once the children collect irrefutable evidence against Khanna. Their contribution to the betterment of society is acknowledged when a police official notes that the children "did very well" (202). Aloke, the eldest and the leader of the group, attributes their success to

cooperation: "the important thing is that we all gelled together pretty well as a team! That's what foiled the criminals" (204). In this way, cooperation takes on a highly political tinge.

A similar pattern is also present in some diasporic texts. For instance, *The Crew* (2003) by Bali Rai demonstrates how politically effective cooperation can be when a group of teenagers from varied racial and cultural backgrounds cooperate to fight crime and corruption in urban Britain. This group of friends adheres to strict moral principles: "We don't do business with racism and jealousy and all that. Positive attitudes only. And we look after each other. You mess with one of us—then you have to deal with us all" (8). Despite their understanding that they are only "a bunch of teenagers looking for our friend" with few "options" or resources (93), they use their intelligence and ingenuity, along with cooperation, to overcome racist, ineffectual authority figures, to expose dangerous criminals and a corrupt police officer, and to rescue their friend. They recognise that they succeed because "when things get messed up, we turn to each other" (200).

Diasporic Indian children's authors demonstrate the moral and spiritual outcomes of cooperation as well as the political. For example, Narinder Dhami frequently shows the Dhillon girls cooperating in her Babes series (2004–2006). The girls strengthen family and community relationships by working together to find a husband for their aunt in *Bindi Babes* (2003) and to help a destitute former Bollywood star to re-establish her career in *Bollywood Babes* (2004). In *Looking for Bapu* (2006) by Anjali Banerjee, Anu's friends of various racial and cultural backgrounds work with him as he searches for his recently deceased grandfather's spirit, helping him to find an outlet for his grief. Although the use of cooperation is central to both Indian and diasporic texts, in the Indian context there is a particularly earnest tone to its widespread use. This positioning of cooperation may have a foundation not only in contemporary ideology, but also in a historical context, in relation to Gandhi and Nehru. My discussion of the foundational Gandhian and Nehruvian concepts in these texts is based on my observation of widespread narrative patterns.

Interconnectedness and Collective Action: The Legacy of Gandhi's Vision

Gandhi is of course world-renowned for his role in the Indian nationalist movement, during which his methods of non-violence were integral to the struggle for independence. However, his visionary aspirations for India extended far beyond political independence. Nor was Gandhi simply a political leader—he was also a deeply religious one, and these two drives together shaped his philosophy and actions. He saw all people as interconnected and believed that the "whole gamut of humanity's activities constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political, and purely religious

works into watertight compartments" (Gandhi 75). Gandhi denounced economic and gender disparity in India and identified several issues as necessary to achieving "national regeneration"; for example, he was deeply disturbed by Hindu-Muslim violence and beseeched Indians to desist from participating in communal conflicts (Parekh 46 and 62). He also urged Indians to reject what he saw as inhumane aspects of the traditional Hinduism that had shaped social hierarchies in the subcontinent (Parekh 46). In these and other issues, Gandhi encouraged individuals to take personal responsibility and action while emphasising the power of collective involvement to secure a desired outcome. Gandhi's actions and philosophy indicate that he "fully accepted the humanistic goal of the freedom of the individual, but he also underlined the interdependence of human beings and, therefore, of their duties and responsibilities toward each other" (Gore 47). He claimed that because there was an "essential unity of humanity" then "if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains with that person" (Gandhi 185).

In some children's novels, Indian authors demonstrate how traditional practices with roots in Hindu doctrine are problematic and promote an improved vision of India guided instead by more liberal values. A Gandhian approach to cooperation shapes such narratives and demonstrates not only that one individual's actions and gains are connected to an entire group's, but also that working together is a powerfully effective strategy for enacting change. For example, in *Sita and the Forest Bandits* (2005) by Jaya Madhavan, ten-year-old Sita, a poor village girl, runs away from home to escape child marriage. The setting is "the old, old days when girls were married at eight, when caste differences were very much rampant" (back cover), and is clearly meant to portray a different, retrograde, Indian social reality. However, as I have discussed, gender discrimination remains problematic in India, as does casteism. This novel addresses the essence of ongoing social concerns in the guise of historical fiction, promoting cooperation as the solution.

Sita, who initially seems powerless, empowers first herself by acting individually to seek personal protection, then her community by cooperating with a diverse group of people to prevent child marriage. At the narrative's outset, Sita tries rationalising, crying, and begging, but she fails to convince her father that she should not be married: "He would never understand. He was so soaked in tradition and customs that he failed to realise that it was a big blunder to marry off girls when they were yet children" (53). Fearing for her physical safety, Sita runs away and survives in the forest by cooperating with two outlaws, one of whom is a tribal spiritual leader.

Eventually the three feel morally compelled to come out of hiding, driven by their aspirations to reform social conditions they perceive as outmoded and harmful: casteism and child marriage. Accordingly, one of Sita's companions poses as a wise man to convince the people of several villages in the area to cooperate in order to overcome casteism, lecturing them that "[t]here is no need for any discrimination within us by way of caste, creed, and religion"

(88). However, the villagers are unwilling to change their ways until he blackmails them, forcing them to work together. When he finally succeeds, he pronounces that his "duty to the society [*sic*] is over" because he has "cured them of discrimination" and they now "liv[e] in peace and togetherness"; thus he no longer cares if he is "captured and punished" and so begins to help Sita in her quest to eliminate child marriage (111).

Sita, too, uses cooperation in an attempt to force the adults of her village to reject a tradition she perceives as harmful and outdated. She gathers the children of her village, and they band together, acting as one unanimous body. Sita acts as their spokesperson, proclaiming:

> We, the children of Dravidapuram, do not want to live with parents who wish to get us married so early. We wish to study, pursue higher education and be of use to the society [*sic*]. We cannot sacrifice our childhood by marrying so young. We want our parents to make a vow that they will think of our marriages only when we are older and at an age appropriate for marriage. Otherwise, we will all leave. (131–132)

The parents and elders of the village finally recognise the worth of the children when faced with their loss, but they are portrayed as too enmeshed in and blinded by tradition to be able to change their ways.

Instead, a local official, "the Viceroy," responds to the children's tactics by legislating a ban on "child marriages in the entire region of Dravidapuram," proposing "an Act declaring child marriage as illegal and a crime against the government," and ensuring that "[p]arents who disobey this rule shall be punished severely" (132). Thus, the children are shown to have an enormous amount of power when they cooperate—enough to change an ancient tradition: "the people of Dravidapuram looked on astonished at what the children had achieved!" (134). Sita grows up to become a journalist, and it is clear that this one social change will catalyse a multitude of subsequent improvements on a larger social and societal scale, particularly in freeing girls to pursue further education.

This use of cooperation premised on a Gandhian, spiritual vision of people as interconnected, is portrayed as a successful strategy for effecting necessary change. It is incomplete, however, without subsequent political action and legislation. Children can act with power, but their power is by no means absolute. It is significant, though, that in *Sita and the Forest Bandits,* the elimination of child marriage, which was an extremely complex social issue in India, particularly with the involvement of the British (signaled in the text by the presence of "the Viceroy"), and one that is by no means resolved today, is attributed primarily to the agency of one girl and the cooperation of a group of children. The novel promotes a powerful spiritual and political strategy to enact positive change and promises that children can play a leading role.

Although this strategy may seem distressingly oversimplified, it is actually closely related to the one proposed in reality by Abdul Kalam in *Mission India* whereby children's actions can help to shape an ideal future India. Indeed, with the inclusion of characters of varied castes and backgrounds as agents capable of enacting change, *Sita and the Forest Bandits* is perhaps actually more progressive, moving forward from Gandhi's certainty that higher castes must take responsibility for lower castes and Abdul Kalam's suggestion that the middle classes reform the lower classes. This novel promotes a vision of social harmony resembling Gandhi's spiritual belief in the "essential unity of humanity"—a belief related to "unity in diversity," a political concept vigorously championed by Nehru.[4]

Nehru's Unity in Diversity

Like Gandhi, Nehru was appalled by Hindu-Muslim tension and other communal conflicts. Recognising the divisive power of communalism, particularly along religious lines, as well as what he considered an Indian propensity to resist modernity because of its apparent incompatibility with traditional religious doctrine, Nehru promoted his secular vision of "unity in diversity" as integral to national progress. This politically pragmatic concept encouraged Indians to identify more strongly with an imagined modern India than with their traditional religious, linguistic, regional, caste, or other affiliations and was premised on the belief that by working together Indians could achieve progress.

Nehru located the presence and power of unity in diversity in both the past and the future. For example, reflecting on history in *The Discovery of India*, he speculated that

> [t]hough outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. (*Essential Writings* 7)

In terms of the future, Nehru was clear that the "national objective" was to achieve "a strong, free and democratic India, where every citizen has an equal place and full opportunity of growth," and that citizens of this new nation must eliminate "inequalities" and direct their energies "to creative and cooperative endeavours" (*Essential Writings* 46). He was a firm supporter of a secular approach to Indian political and social life, advocating that people should be free to practice whatever religion they wish but decreeing that "communalism, separatism, isolationism, untouchability, bigotry and exploitation of many by man have no place" because only by eliminating these practices could "a united but composite nation where both individual and national freedoms are secure" emerge (*Essential Writings* 46).

Despite these idealised aspirations, which are clearly based on a secular liberal philosophy, India has not yet become the egalitarian, industrialised nation that Nehru envisioned. In fact, Gore contends that India is "less of a nation today" because it has not succeeded in "heal[ing] the fissures of the Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Sikh and Hindu North-non-Hindi South divides" nor in making "inequalities" such as those perpetuated by caste, "socially, economically, or politically irrelevant" (53). As the epigraph makes clear, Gore claims that unity in diversity has not become a reality but urges Indians to keep working towards it, as this principle alone can provide a workable guiding ethos for the vast country. Whether or not this is true is an issue best left to political scientists, and whereas unity in diversity may not, as Gore contends, be a reality in India, it *is* a reality in the world of English-language Indian children's novels. For the most part, these texts offer an imagined India in which each living being has something to offer, and where by working together, a liberatory social harmony is achieved. As Sunder Rajan notes, "Contemporary writings for children in India that reveal sensitivity to issues of difference are recent and self-conscious attempts to counter the common biases found in almost all [Indian] institutions and practices" ("Fictions of Difference" 100). Whereas in reality differences may be a source of conflict, in the children's novels they are instead a source of strength.

Awareness of diversity is a central and delicately balanced theme developed throughout *Jaldi's Friends* (Swaminathan 2003), a text in which the ideology of strength in difference is extensively developed. The protagonist, Jaldi, is a young "Bombay stray" dog, and her friends are other dogs, humans, and animals of several species. The use of anthropomorphised animals is effective, as it negates both a blithe pretense of universality and the possibility of religious nuance. The messages in this novel are Nehru's: differences need not be divisive, and not only can they be put aside to enact positive change, they can also be mutually beneficial. In Swaminathan's imagined "parallel Bombay," class and species differences are positioned as less important than personal ability and good intent, qualities that are celebrated. The message is clear: anybody who wants to help and to make a difference can do so, and everybody's varied ways of contributing are valuable. Even the title is telling and sets the tone thematically. The emphasis is not solely on Jaldi, the protagonist, but rather her *friends.* It is as a whole that this group, composed of dogs, humans, birds, an elephant, and a donkey, each with its own unique abilities to contribute to the cause of making Bombay a better place, can make a positive impact.

The narrative begins with Jaldi's transition from a cosseted puppyhood to her training to become a member of a crime-fighting dog pack. Jaldi initially feels insecure about her personal abilities, convinced that she does not have as much to offer as her brothers because the "things I smelt or heard were usually quite different" (4). Even at the outset of the story, when Jaldi is unsure about her perceptions of the world, they are described not negatively as incorrect or useless, but with the more neutral designation of different—a designation

that comes to be celebrated later in the text. Her mother validates Jaldi's perception of the world by consistently supporting her daughter. She frequently emphasises that everyone has valuable qualities and always encourages Jaldi to trust her own instincts and abilities, no matter how different they seem: "'Just tell us what you think,' Mother said, as she always does, a dozen times a day" (4). Jaldi slowly comes to adopt her mother's confidence in her abilities, finally realising that her telepathic powers, although certainly different, are also unique and valuable because they allow her to help others.

One way difference is emphasised in the narrative is through frequent contrasts between humans and canines. Focalised through Jaldi's point of view, these contrasts are couched in language ranging from bewildered amusement, to frustration, to acceptance. One scene that effectively represents this pattern occurs at the railway station, where Jaldi approaches a woman: "It's very difficult to open a conversation with a human being. Most humans think you're asking for something when you approach them. . . . They simply can't understand that all a Bombay Stray wants is to pass the time of day pleasantly" (17). However, Jaldi does find a woman with whom to "pass the time of day," experiencing a "conversation" that although non-verbal, is "good" (17). This scene is powerful in that it portrays two individuals from different species who have different ways of communicating and who fundamentally misunderstand each other. Even so, they are portrayed as trusting one another and interacting in a positive way, despite these differences.

In *Jaldi's Friends* everyone is valuable, even Jaldi—a young, homeless mongrel dog from a seemingly powerless group. That such dogs are capable of solving crime and defeating human villains by cooperating with others to ensure the betterment of all illustrates this principle vividly. Nevertheless, the novel also illustrates that no amount of acceptance can erase difference. In Jaldi's case, this idea is made clear when she observes that "[h]umans are all very well as friends, but, according to Yogi, they make terrible teachers" (24). Ultimately, difference remains, and the best strategy for achieving harmony is one that promotes cooperation, understanding and mutual aid, rather than eradication of difference. In *Jaldi's Friends*, a dog is always a dog, while humans remain human, but this is not to say that they cannot create an effectively functioning and harmonious community by drawing on their different strengths and cooperating.

As the narrative progresses, more species are introduced and the social dynamic becomes complex, as Jaldi must learn to navigate not only human-canine differences but others as well. For example, when she hears about the elephant before meeting him, she initially reacts with suspicion, wondering "what sort of monster this Ilango was" (57). However, Jaldi judges his behaviour and individual contributions to the community, rather than his difference, concluding that he "was kind to Berry at any rate, so he couldn't be very fierce" (57). As a result, she remains open-minded and trusting when she meets him. Berry, a puppy, demonstrates that difference need not be

divisive when she interprets her relationship with the elephant as familial, calling him "Grandpa" (57). Their relationship, as well as several others in *Jaldi's Friends*, illustrates the premise that individuals from different groups can care for one another, help each other, and work and live together compatibly and peacefully.

In fact, it is this bond between species that ensures safety and stability for all. When this bond is broken, members of all groups become vulnerable, proving the importance of unity in diversity. One of her mentors clarifies this phenomenon to Jaldi when explaining how the criminals they are trying to capture succeed:

> They break the bond between dog and man. They persuade and threaten dogs to turn against the humans who trust them, and make humans turn against trustworthy dogs. With the friendship broken, each becomes an easy target. (81)

In dialogue such as this, as well as narrative commentary focalised through Jaldi, ideological messages of acceptance, cooperation, and interconnectedness are frequently reiterated.

As I have mentioned, Swaminathan cites communal riots as the inspiration for *Jaldi's Friends*. She expunges any mention of this reality from the text, preferring to counter reality by offering instead an inspirational animal utopia in which acceptance, unity, and strength in difference erase the political realities of Mumbai and instead create a positive, imagined vision of a *possible* reality. The optimism in this text is premised on the belief that cooperation and acceptance can enable such a society to emerge, one in which difference is a source of strength rather than strife.

In contrast to the fantastic idealism of *Jaldi's Friends,* a few novels take a starkly realistic look at violence sparked by difference. In *The Battle for No. 19* (Lal 2007), a work of historical fiction set during the 1984 New Delhi riots (during which Hindus attacked Sikhs after Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards), the author is brutally graphic in his warnings against communal violence. He includes descriptive scenes based on the actual events of the riots. For example, shortly after the narrative begins, the Sikh friend and driver of the eight central (middle-class, non-Sikh) schoolgirl characters is attacked by a mob:

> Within seconds the mob had ripped his orange turban off his head and was binding his hands with it. The rods rose and fell. She heard the sickening dull crunch as ribs and bones and skull cracked and splintered and then he—big, belly-laughing Kartar Singh—was screaming like a schoolgirl—like one of them, as the knives went in and out and the blood began gushing down his head and face, dyeing his snowy beard scarlet. (8–9)

Kartar Singh is portrayed as heroic in his efforts to try to help the girls escape. Even while he is being tortured and murdered, his concern is for them. He urges them to "Get out . . . run! Run! Go!" even though the mob "had already broken his legs and now they were on to him again, pushing him to his knees" (9). This is the first indication in the text that persecution because of difference elicits disastrous consequences but that it can be overcome.

The girls do escape, heroic themselves due to their strong nerves and bodies, not to mention their intelligence, and they find temporary sanctuary in a large house nearby. However, they discover that the house is owned by a Sikh family, which places them in continued danger. They are able to survive only through cooperation, as each girl contributes unique and valuable skills to the group, as well as acting with courage and strength. For example, Seema is highly observant and intelligent: she realises that by changing the name placard outside the house from a Sikh name to that of a Hindu dignitary, they can stave off the mob for some time. Sangita is technologically proficient and makes the necessary changes to the name placard, as well as coping with various pieces of electronic equipment in the house. Sheetal is brave and strong, providing brute strength to protect the others, while Puja is a talented archer, and her skill and precise delicacy similarly provide protection. Gauri is a nurturing homebody, and she cooks and cares for the group to keep them healthy and strong. It is not simply their individual qualities, important as these are, that save the girls. Only together can they survive. They embody the principle of unity in diversity. Lal portrays them cooperating and conferring over strategy ceaselessly. By working together intellectually and physically drawing on their differing individual strengths, they actually manage not only to survive but also to capture many of the men from the mob, who later attack the house, so that they can be brought to justice.

The girls work together and stay together through every challenge, regardless of the level of threat to their physical well-being. Even when they are terrified of their attackers, they bravely act as one, such as when "[t]hey were standing in a wide semi-circle, well out of the range of the spear. . . . Sangita and Gauri had Simi firmly behind them, and Seema was clutching Jogi's hand" (127). Their united front is frequently emphasised as the source of their power: "Puja and Sheetal stood side by side, hiding their fright behind their masks. Behind them, Seema and Sangita waited tensely, and behind them, in turn, Jaya and Gauri stood poised," even though they are "trembling like deer ready to flee" (148). The men, who thought they would be facing the easy prey of "a group of weeping, hysterical schoolgirls, who they could silence and squash easily with a slap or a blow." realise that instead they are up against a "scheming demonic contingent" (153).

The principles of unity in diversity and resistance of communal thinking are further illustrated in this novel through the powerful trope of inter-religious friendship. While the city around them succumbs to division because of communal violence, the girls maintain their accepting attitudes by befriend-

ing and protecting the household's two Sikh children, whom they find hiding in the house. Although taking responsibility for the children initially makes their own survival more precarious, they are eventually rewarded when the children actually help them all to gain salvation—the ideological message of this outcome is obvious. Long after the central conflict is resolved, the girls and their families maintain close friendships with the children and their family. Indeed, in an epilogue, Lal reveals that one of the younger girls eventually contemplates marrying Jogi, the Sikh boy, promoting intermarriage as the long-used, ultimate purveyor of intercultural acceptance. The childhood equivalent of this motif is friendship.

Intercultural Friendship: A Panacea

My discussion of cooperation and unity in diversity frequently implies that friendship plays a role in these relationships, a point which now becomes my focus. Friendship is an important means by which Indian children's authors portray harmonious social interaction, particularly on an intercultural level. In foregrounding intercultural friendships, Indian children's authors share an approach commonly used by many authors of multicultural children's literature.

Particularly in the diaspora, friendship is imagined as one of the most effective ways to eliminate racism and xenophobia in these novels, as I indicated with the brief example from *The Crew.* Most diasporic protagonists participate in intercultural friendships: usually the Indian characters' best friends come from a different cultural or racial background (by no means are they always Caucasian). In works for young adults there are also several instances of intercultural romantic relationships, a theme that Bali Rai explores extensively in *(un)arranged marriage* (2001) and *The Last Taboo* (2006), both of which are cautionary tales that expose the extreme consequences of racism and cultural intolerance. Here, though, my focus is friendship, as this motif is also important in the Indian texts.

In the diasporic texts intercultural friendship is often portrayed matter-of-factly, positioned as a normalised component of a harmoniously multicultural community.[5] None of the young Indian characters in diasporic novels display bigoted attitudes, and many experience multicultural harmony in their personal relationships because they are surrounded by friends of different cultural backgrounds. For example, protagonists such as Maya in *Maya Running* (Banerjee 2005), Sunita in *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* (Perkins 2005), Indie in *Indie Girl* (Daswani 2007), and many more, have best friends who are not Indian, which is not portrayed as problematic in the texts. In this way, young Indian characters resist racism and xenophobia on the personal level, while they are aware that outside of their immediate spheres these are problematic societal issues. Friendship is offered as a solution that can

overcome such xenophobia. It is an avenue open to child characters through which they can perform their value systems.

Racism, when it is explored, is usually ascribed to members of the dominant culture, as I discuss further in Chapter 6. However several authors, including Bali Rai, ascribe racist attitudes to diasporic Indians and position these characters as significant threats to multicultural harmony. Whereas in *(un)arranged marriage*, *Rani and Sukh*, and *The Crew*, Rai shows healthy multicultural communities at work by portraying multicultural schools and neighbourhoods and by textually promoting intercultural friendships, mentorships, and romances, he also points to members of the Punjabi Sikh community, especially first-generation immigrants, as key threats to the ultimate success of these communities and relationships. A scene-setting device in *(un) arranged marriage* is typical of the way Rai endorses multicultural communities when the protagonist enthuses:

> It was one of the things that I loved about Leicester. Some areas were nearly all white, some black and some Asian. And everyone kind of melted into the city centre so that it was all multicultural. I liked that—it was the way it should be. (33)

However, the protagonist Manny also complains that this "wasn't the way my family saw it," prescribing that "it was down to us kids to sort things out" (33).

Manny's father, like several other Punjabi Sikh characters in Bali Rai's novels, is viciously racist. He believes that he must save "Punjabi culture from the grips of the white man and his filth" (27) and endorses difference when he tells Manny "You are a Punjabi, not a *goreh*. You are not from this country, even if you were born here. These people are not the same as us. They are not the same. We have to protect our culture, Manjit. Our way of life" (67). Although Manny attempts to "sort things out," he realises that he can control and affect only his own personal values, attitudes, behaviour, and relationships. He is powerless to transform his father or other members of the Sikh community. The multicultural ideology of Rai and several other Indian children's writers, both in the diaspora and in India, clearly demonstrates the limits of power regarding child characters' intercultural relationships. Whereas they choose their friends and romantic partners without racism, their families and communities sometimes hold opposing views.

However, many authors publishing in India offer aspirational portrayals of intercultural friendship as a means to overcome racism and create social harmony and without limiting the effectiveness of this social mode. As in the diaspora, in many novels from India friendships between characters with different cultural, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds are often also portrayed in a matter-of-fact, normalised manner. Usually the development of these relationships are not the focus of the narrative. However, *Andaman's Boy* (1998) by Zai Whitaker and *Caravan to Tibet* (2007) by Deepa Agarwal

both illustrate the development of particularly powerful intercultural friendships and seem to suggest that such friendships have the power to neutralise potentially divisive cultural differences.

In *Caravan to Tibet*, a work of historical fiction, protagonist Debu is haunted by his father's recent disappearance. He is determined to find his father by setting out with his tribe, the Shauka, on their annual trading trek to Tibet. Along the way, he makes two unlikely new friends, both from cultures strikingly different from his own: one is a boy Buddhist lama, the other is an adult Tibetan trader, Sonam Darka. Whereas the former seems to hinder Debu's progress (although indirectly helping him), the latter directly aids him.

Sonam Darka joins the trade caravan in Debu's village, accompanying the group back to Tibet and remaining with Debu whenever possible until the final reunion between Debu and his father. Along the journey, Sonam Darka acts as a cultural intermediary, warmly and patiently introducing Debu to Buddhist traditions and supplying information about the other tribes and customs they encounter. Debu responds to information about and people from different cultures with acceptance and respect. Only together, Agarwal demonstrates, can they make their way peacefully and productively through the trade route. Sonam Darka's aid and support are integral to Debu's ability to succeed in his quest and further ensures social harmony and economic prosperity when Debu's father and Sonam Darka later create a business alliance. *Caravan to Tibet* clearly showcases the benefits of intercultural friendship and the social strength it builds.

Similarly, in *Andaman's Boy*, intercultural friendship allows the protagonist's success, in this case in relation to finding a secure home. Arif is a ten-year-old orphan who escapes his avaricious, abusive relatives in Mumbai. He travels alone south through India, eventually finding a new home and family with the Jarawa tribe in the Andaman Islands. On Arif's quest, intercultural friendship allows him to progress, and his ultimate acceptance into the Jarawa tribe in the Andaman Islands grants him a secure home at the conclusion of the narrative.

During his journey from Mumbai to the Andamans, Arif makes friends with many people from a variety of class, caste, cultural, and religious backgrounds, each of whom influences his movements as well as his understanding of the world. At approximately the halfway point of this journey, Arif is employed to care for some goats on a ship traveling to the Andamans. Out in the middle of the ocean, Arif finds a miniature multicultural utopia, presided over by the ship's captain, a Hindu who demonstrates his commitment to diversity through friendship by proclaiming, "My best friends in my village are all Muslims" (Whitaker 41) when he mistakenly takes Arif for a Muslim. In this small, temporary community, harmony reigns. The captain decrees:

> You will be our one and only Muslim. All other religions are there. We also have two Jains, sitting there feeding the mosquitos and ants. Christians,

> Hindus, Jains, even Buddhists—see those monks in that corner, they're going to the shrine made by the Japanese during the war. And now you. Our Muslim. In the Andamans everyone gets along, it's a caste-no-bar policy, not like the mainland. (41)

Although Arif is not Muslim, he accepts this designation and becomes a productive and cooperative member of the ship's harmonious crew and passengers.

This floating utopia is a very accepting community. For example, during a discussion about the Jarawa tribe, the captain insists that the Jarawa have been mistreated by many outsiders, reminding the passengers that Andaman's land belongs to the tribe, and that outsiders "broke the law and trespass[ed] in the Reserve" (44). As a result of the captain's guidance, Arif comes to respect the Jarawa, unconditionally accepting that their values and lifestyle are valid, even while some of the passengers on the ship call the Jarawa "*junglees*" and insist that they should be forced to modernise their way of life.

It is, possibly, this introduction to the Jarawa that allows Arif to approach his first, accidental meeting with some members of the tribe with an open, accepting attitude. When he first meets a Jarawa boy of his own age, Eetha Aleho, they are quickly able to find a rudimentary method of communication, and "soon the boys were rolling over and over in the sand, laughing" (108). Arif quickly learns the complicated ritual greeting of Eetha Aleho's tribe, and he does his best to perform it respectfully when his new friend introduces him to the members of the group. After some discussion, the tribe decides that Arif can stay with them because of the friendship between the two boys: "Eetha Aleho pinched him. 'Hey, listen. They're asking, will you come with us?' 'Yes, of course! I want to! Yes, oh yes!' Arif nodded his head vigourously" (115).

During his stay with the Jarawa tribe, which is portrayed positively as a simple, utopian community free of corruption, greed, and industrial progress while co-existing harmoniously with its environment, Arif's friendship with Eetha Aleho deepens. Arif learns the language and customs of the tribe, and ultimately he is adopted into the group as one of the family after he helps them to resist subjugation by the Indian government. As a result of his open-minded acceptance of other cultures, Arif garners a friend, a secure place in the world, and even a new family—one that cares for him much more deeply than his own biological family.

Viewed on a symbolic level, this text offers a strategy by which child readers could approach social relationships positively—one that makes the principle of unity in diversity a reality through intercultural friendship. As parables, *Andaman's Boy*, as well as *Caravan to Tibet* and many others, promote a clear message: intercultural friendship and acceptance lead to social harmony, in which everyone can find a secure home. The message is oversimplified, but it does offer an ethos—one that real children can adopt—with the potential to encourage social transformation. Further, both texts focus on characters outside of the dominant Hindu, urban, middle-class value system so often

portrayed in the texts in this sample. These characters and cultures are valued within the narratives for their own unique ways of being, and characters from differing cultural backgrounds find common ground through friendship.

Andaman's Boy is also a progressive text in the sense that it conveys the importance of treating Indian minority groups, such as tribals, with respect and acceptance. The rights of these tribes are protected by the Constitution. This novel supports the multicultural ethos of the Indian Constitution in terms of its ideological message. Further, it critiques the oppressive policies of the Indian government towards many tribal groups (despite the Constitution). This novel is above all didactic, as its message is highly moral and it has an obvious educational intention to inform child readers about the customs and cultures of the Jawara in order to promote understanding and acceptance. *Andaman's Boy* is one of the few texts that successfully illustrates the rich diversity and multiculturalism of the Indian nation, a premise extended here even to its tribes that are thus accepted as Indian citizens that deserve equal rights. Significantly, fictional intercultural friendship is the vehicle that enables this ideology to be conveyed.

The use of friendship is a frequently employed strategy in these novels to portray acceptance and unity, and it is usually shown to be powerful enough to overcome differences, which then leads to strength. One text which foregrounds this kind of friendship is *Tin Fish* (Chakravarti 2005). However, unlike many other novels, in this text there is no optimistic, closed ending. Rather, the limitations of friendship in youth are demonstrated, and its power is restricted to the small, utopian community of "Planet Mayo," a prestigious boys' boarding school.

At Mayo College, four boys from different socioeconomic and religious backgrounds become best friends and surrogate brothers. The boys reinvent themselves with nicknames, by which they are exclusively known to one another at school, thus highlighting the insularity of their relationship. Protagonist Barun feels a much deeper emotional connection with his friends than with his family, in spite of their varying cultural, class, and religious backgrounds. Barun himself, known as Brandy by his friends, comes from an upper-middle-class Bengali Brahmin family, while his friend Fish is from a middle-class Hindu family based in Singapore. His other two friends are PT Shoe, from a family of Rajasthani royalty, and Porridge, who is Caucasian and Catholic.

Although their bond is portrayed as unique and special, this is only possible, it is clear, because Mayo College is an enclosed space, a miniature nation, "a world in itself—Planet Mayo," in which acceptance is the norm and harmony most often reigns: it is composed of "chaps from all over India . . . rich chaps and poor chaps on scholarship, and black chaps and white chaps, guys from all religions and even no religion" (58). What unites these boys is membership to a group: as Mayo students, they are all perceived as both intelligent and potential future leaders of the nation. In this context of Planet Mayo, the boys struggle to make their backgrounds irrelevant, as PT Shoe's

attitude towards his family origins attests: "He wasn't a prince, he would tell us—in India there were no princes any more, only some rich guys with big moustaches who owned forts which people bought tickets to see. He would get a real job when he grew up" (3). Thus, it is not only in their unconditional acceptance of and love for one another that the boys embrace an accepting, respectful worldview, but also in their absolute rejection of their families' outmoded, racist, and casteist attitudes. This rejection is one of the central ways the characters define themselves—along with, perhaps paradoxically, an identification with their position of prestige as "the future leaders of India," which they are told is what "Mayo trained its boys to become" (65).

The acceptance and equality portrayed between boys of such varied backgrounds is not, however, consistent throughout the narrative. Rather, Planet Mayo is a closed and exceptional community, outside of which this attitude is neither extended nor replicated. Indeed, so separate is Mayo from its surroundings, both local and national, that Barun speculates,

> I think we would be able to tell when we had left [the local town of] Ajmer behind and entered the campus even with our eyes closed, because the smells and sounds of India would disappear. Mayo was our India, and it had a different smell and sound (37)

The contrast with the nearby town of Ajmer highlights the differences between the two worlds. Barun associates Ajmer with other parts of India he has seen, full of dung and peasants: "Mayo seemed like a better place than Ajmer, which was a dusty and dirty town where people rode mopeds and tongas" (34). He and his friends are scornful of the locals, seeing them as entirely separate: "we rarely mixed with them because they were lokus and therefore different from us" and maintaining this social and emotional distance even when "Mayo guys and lokus" are "standing and drinking, with not much distance to separate them" (34). The locals can be equally scornful of the boys from Mayo, in one heated scene designating them with several of the most dramatically insulting slurs possible: "'*Angrez ke aulad*!' he shouted. Sons of Englishmen. He scratched his head and added as an afterthought, '*Saaley, bhainchod*.' Shits, sisterfuckers" (49). No common ground is highlighted here, nor is possible reconciliation between these two disparate social groups strategised in the text.

Rather, the emphasis in *Tin Fish* is on the social microcosm, contradictory as this may be. Only inside Planet Mayo, and through the relationship of intercultural friendships, is the central characters' rejection of prevalent societal attitudes possible. In Barun's case, the issue is articulated in terms of casteism. For example, he is confused and disgusted by habitual tension in his family: "They were always very upset with Ma because Ma didn't come from a Brahmin family and that was supposed to be terrible because Papa's family were all Brahmins of a very high sub-caste" (76). When he tries to discuss this with his father, however, no productive solutions come to the fore, which

further frustrates Barun: "I asked Papa once some years ago and he looked serious and told me not to get upset about these things because they didn't make sense. Papa was right. It was all very fucked, and something had to happen soon to make it right" (77).

However, the adolescent male characters, although enraged by the unfairness they see in their nation, which is embodied in their parents, are powerless to "make it right"; in this sense, the novel shares the limited aspirations of Rai's diasporic novels. The boys are unable to "make it right" beyond living their own lives in a way they believe is morally and philosophically correct and by shaping their own relationships differently inside Planet Mayo. Barun sees his own and his group's powerlessness on parallel terms with the larger national political situation; for instance, he observes that

> things like fundamental rights and the freedom of expression shit were for grown-ups, because no kid I knew ever had any freedom of expression or fundamental rights and got jacked by grown-ups whenever they tried to do what they wanted. (57)

Although the boys are free to shape their personal friendships and values according to their own system inside Planet Mayo, this is the limit of their power.

At the conclusion of *Tin Fish*, the group of friends separates for the summer holidays. There is no clear resolution to the struggles with class, caste, religion and culture that they have been facing. Rather, Chakravarti highlights of the strength and validity of their relationship—the only thing they can control: "I hugged the guys quickly and jumped into the train. I stood at the door, waving at the shapes of Porridge and PT Shoe through a haze of tears until the train curved and took them away from me" (236). Their enforced separation for the summer holidays draws attention to the tenuousness and temporariness of this control. Friendship is celebrated in the narrative as the ultimate solution to disunity, but at the same time its power is severely limited to the personal realm and does not extend to the broader political, national level. Barun can find no way to reconcile the injustices he perceives except for ensuring he does not perpetuate them, and also by choosing to spend his time with others of like mind.

Tin Fish is unique in its harsh examination of social issues (which may be related to its intended audience of adolescents), yet it remains consistent with other novels in this corpus in its portrayal of middle- and upper-class youth as the only group textually invested with agency and the power to enact social transformation—no matter how limited. Although its conclusion is not optimistic in the way *Andaman's Boy* and *Jaldi's Friends* are, it still contains an inherent promise, premised on the notion that the personal is political. Their limited power as young people implies that, as the future leaders of India, if Barun and his friends go forward into positions of power maintaining their current attitudes, they may have enough influence to enact significant change

on a larger societal level—to turn India into the place they want it to be, the place they experience in microcosm at Mayo, rather than they place they know it to be. By extension of logic, in the same way, *every* young person—every reader—that chooses to embrace acceptance and unity through friendship in her or his own sphere can make an impact on the larger society. Accordingly, in only one or two generations, India could be a very different nation: one with greatly improved peace and harmony.

It is important to acknowledge what this promise excludes, however. As I have shown, anyone outside of Planet Mayo is not considered an equal by the characters inside it. Therefore, it is doubtful whether these characters will have the vision or commitment to attempt to extend such acceptance and respect to the entire nation, and thus it is difficult to say how far-reaching social transformation might be. It seems as though the full equality of members of lower castes and classes is not a primary concern. In this sense, *Tin Fish* does not provide as extensive a vision of unity in diversity as *Andaman's Boy* does, but rather perpetuates the status quo on a sociopolitical level, thus in many ways supporting a hegemonic structure. It is more realistic about the limiting social factors that exist in real life, but it does—like so many Indian children's novels in this sample— offer an actual means to achieve empowerment for child readers, beginning on the personal level.

The Children Are the Future

Sunder Rajan recognises the frequent textual representation of child characters' acceptance of difference in English-language Indian children's literature, which she notes is often demonstrated through friendship, and claims that this makes children "differen[t] from—and superio[r] to—adult human beings, with their hegemonic constructions of difference" ("Fictions of Difference" 106). Although children's stories have positioned children as superior to adults since the influence of the Romantics began to affect literature for children, this positioning is significant in the Indian texts because it suggests that children can act collectively to create widespread social transformation.

Accordingly, in *The Battle for No. 19*, Lal invites readers to understand that children's true power is not so much in their intellectual or physical abilities, nor in their capacity for acceptance which enables intercultural friendships, nor even in their willingness to cooperate and find strength in difference, but actually in their ability to recognise the hypocrisy and flaws in adult attitudes. The central character, Puja, voices the child's seemingly futile frustration when she reflects on the riots while she and her friends prepare to defend themselves against an attack by members of an angry mob:

> *A five-thousand-year-old civilization, so quick to lecture the world about its own greatness and belief in ahimsa, and their barbarism! Some progress*

> *we've made, some civilization we've produced, some lessons we've learnt since 1947! Why did adults always, but always, preach one thing and practice exactly the opposite—and think that no one has noticed.* (60–61)

Puja and her friends not only recognise but also refute this hypocrisy by resisting it. They physically defend themselves to the extent necessary, they protect the Sikh children in the house, yet they do not seek vengeance when the conflict subsides.

In the epilogue Puja has become a teacher, and as an adult she not only continues to resist xenophobia and communalism, she also indoctrinates her pupils against it, warning them that: "We just don't learn from what history teaches us. . . . We just keep on committing the same appalling acts over and over again. Our minds must be sick. No society that does this can think of itself as civilized" (183). She encourages her pupils to break the cycle. By portraying Puja as an adult who still maintains the same value system she subscribed to in her youth, and one who actively disseminates and lives those beliefs, Lal draws attention to the possibility of social transformation. This ideology seems particularly urgently communicated in the novels published in India, where inequality and communal violence are literally life and death issues.

Not surprisingly, then, Lal aligns himself with the many other children's writers, not to mention Indian politicians and educators, who believe that children provide hope for a better future. Not only in *The Battle for No. 19* but also in the majority of other contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels that foreground cooperation and friendship, children are portrayed as powerful enough to elicit social harmony, even if only on a microcosmic level. Indian children's literature author and scholar Dr. Ira Saxena positions the role of these texts in the pursuit of national unity and harmony, arguing that it is "multi-cultural, symbolizing the true character of Indian nationality. . . . Indian diversity is tremendous . . . yet a common strand of tolerance, of beliefs, customs and tradition runs deep within everyone" ("Fiction" 119). Whereas there is abundant evidence both in reality and in the novels in this sample to disprove Saxena's claim that "everyone" in India is tolerant, the salient point is that this is the ideology communicated throughout these children's novels, even though contradictions in the ideology create significant textual fissures.

Consistent across the majority of the novels in this sample is the insistence that children can use cooperation and friendship to achieve transformation, particularly in creating the social equality promoted by a liberal value system. Despite the fact that the texts often restrict the level of power to the children's personal spheres, the majority of these texts, although differing in genre, tone, content, and place of publication, share at their cores the promise that children can act both with individual agency and with communal strength to transform their own lives and families to become more egalitarian—or even simply happier—and their communities into safer, better places where diversity does not preclude political unity or social harmony. Just as a feminist

value system underpins many of the novels and emphasises interrelationships, so too is the use of cooperation equally central and positioned as equally powerful and indispensable.

These foundational values in the narratives are particularly significant in relation to the issue of Indian nation building, a pursuit in which interconnectivity and unity in diversity are frequently positioned by major Indian politicians and scholars as indispensable. Such ideas infiltrate the children's novels on more subtle levels, such as in *Jaldi's Friends* and *Caravan to Tibet*, and more overtly, as in the case of *Adventure Before Midnight* (2004) by Nilima Sinha. The moment is 15 August 1947—Indian Independence day—and the protagonist recognises that he and all his friends have made valuable contributions to the Freedom Movement by joining the "Young Patriots," because "every child, every man in this country is fighting for the liberation of our Motherland" (Sinha 389). The protagonist observes at the moment of Independence: "How different each of us was from the other . . . yet each was an integral part of our new nation" (450). The possibility of contributing to nation-building is the resounding focus—and promise—of many contemporary, English-language children's novels published in India, as I discuss next.

Chapter Four
Imagining and Performing the Indian Nation

> The new India must be served by earnest, efficient workers who have an ardent faith in the cause they serve and are bent on achievement, and who work for the joy and glory of it. . . .
>
> Freedom for a nation and a people may be, and is, I believe, always good in the long run; but in the final analysis, freedom itself is a means to an end, that end being the raising of those people to higher levels and the general advancement of humanity.
>
> **(Nehru 31–32. *Essential Writings*. 1937)**

> [I]t is heartening to note, that India has developed its own unique children's literature that promotes national pride and culture. This culture or the love of it makes up the soul of India.
>
> **(Menon, "Children's Literature" 54)**

The Power of Children's Literature in Nation-Building: The Indian Context

In my discussion of cooperation, friendship, and unity in diversity, I argued that the novels' aspirational approaches to social relations are well suited to a child audience. Whereas this is true, it is equally true that textual portrayals failing to adequately or accurately represent Indian "diversity" due to oversimplification or omission are problematic. Accordingly, many of the novels in this sample are troubling due to the specific, hegemonic version of the Indian nation they portray and their promise that particular national aspirations, both goals set by Nehru historically and the more contemporary ones outlined in *Mission India*, for example, can be achieved by dutiful children when

they embody nationally valuable character traits. Such dutiful, courageous child characters are represented in the majority of contemporary English-language children's novels published in India: because they are characterised heroically, child readers who identify with them may be inspired by and wish to emulate their behaviour.

Discussing the links between children's literature and national identity, Carol Fox defines national identity as "whatever cultural characteristics a society (or nation) feels its members share that distinguish it from other groups" and notes that this could be multicultural rather than monocultural and thus utilise "*cultural diversity* as its defining feature" (44). Although Fox happens to be discussing British children's literature, she could, ironically, have been referring to contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels. It is also ironic that whereas unity in diversity and the use of cooperation are ostensibly so crucial in these texts, the central child characters portrayed are homogenous rather than diverse. For instance, more than 80% of the protagonists are urban and/or middle-class, upper-caste children.[1] As in the case of the new Indian girl, these middle-class characters act to shape their communities—and thus the nation in microcosm. Indian children from other backgrounds lack agency and are excluded from the central narratives, which are always focalised from the point of view of the protagonists. Characters from rural areas and from lower castes and classes, when they are present in the novels, are generally restricted to appearing as secondary characters or as part of a collective protagonist. They rarely play a central role, and usually these characters are stereotyped token inclusions.

Further, these characters often need to be rescued by the protagonists, in a pattern related to the new Indian girl who rescues or converts Third World girls. For example, in *Andaman's Boy*, urban, middle-class Arif travels to a remote Andaman island and helps a small tribe to escape subjugation by the Indian government. In *Ladakh Adventure* (Dalal 2000), middle-class "school boys" Vikram and Aditya travel to northern India, where they rescue a young Tibetan lama from kidnappers. In these scenarios and many more like them, representatives of the hegemonic group maintain power. This is a significant ideological pattern, regardless of the fact that these child characters appear to use their power for "good," to help others.

A more disturbing example of this pattern occurs in *The Hunt for the Miracle Herb* (Agarwal 1995), in which socioeconomic power structures remain undisrupted throughout the narrative. When the three urban, middle-class child protagonists visit their uncle's medicinal herb farm in the Himalayas, they come to believe they might be able to find an herb that will cure cancer. Their uncle's young servant, Harkum, knows where the herb grows and escorts them to his village far up in the mountains: they find the herb and become convinced that it will enable a cure for cancer. Undoubtedly, these children are acting for the greater good not only of the nation, but also of humanity in general. However, their family also stands to profit handsomely from the

"discovery" of the herb (the villagers have been using it for generations), and although financial rewards are discussed, there is no mention of extending any reward to Harkum. In this case, the servant boy appears to be serving the nation only for "joy and glory," as Nehru invited Indians to do in 1937, while Harkum's social superiors reap the additional benefit of financial gain.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, English-language Indian children's literature arose in the context of newly independent India and was believed to have the capacity to play a role in shaping the new nation. Literature can contribute to this ideological goal when narratives that celebrate the nation encourage child readers to feel national pride, thus priming them to be receptive to national aspirations. Several critics have noted of Indian children's fiction that some of it is specifically designed to foster national pride (Menon, "Children's Literature" 54; Saxena, "Fiction" 119). On this basis and in relation to textual foci, I argue that the majority of English-language children's novels published in India over the past two decades can clearly be seen as part of a nation-building project. These texts not only demonstrate the cultural worth of Indian art, architecture, food, and other cultural markers in historical and contemporary contexts, but also, and perhaps more persuasively, they feature admirable Indian child characters with whom the intended Indian child readers can identify and who act heroically to fulfill national aspirations.

The use of children's literature to perpetuate national ideology has been clearly established by many critics. For instance, Maxim Gorky believed that children's literature could be politically influential and could support nation-building; he encouraged the production of children's literature to these ends in the Soviet Union (Walter 45–48). Indians who promote children's literature as a tool for nation-building are very much aware of the Soviet model in this enterprise, and of its success (Anand, J. H. 19). Many urge a similar approach. For instance, in *Trends in Juvenile Literature in India* (1976), Ajit Kumar Das called for children's literature to act as a nation-building tool:

> [T]he tender children of today build up the mighty future of a nation. So, juvenile literature plays a great role in giving a proper shape to the mind of children. . . . [A] new social consciousness has peeped in, so we are not far from the time when we should think of social development by means of children's literature. (33)

Das recommended that this literature be realistic rather than fantastic and was confident that it would result in a "bright future of a free and democratic India" peopled with "worthy citizens" who can "build up a happy future for the nation" (36).

This project may seem liberatory in the sense that a crucial task of post-colonial nations is to reclaim a sense of political initiative and cultural identity from the coloniser. India is a relatively new nation that has struggled to overcome the aftermath of colonial rule. Further, some political groups are

determined to resist western cultural influence in the present. Even more urgently, a major goal of the hegemonic group is to reshape Indian social behaviour according to a secular liberal value system and to eliminate ongoing communal conflicts. It is possible to view Indian children's literature as attempting to realise these aspirations. In this sense Das's hopes have been realised, in attempt if not in outcome.

Paradoxically, though, this attempt to foster national identity and pride actually encourages homogenisation more than diversity. As I have discussed, these novels are produced by and for the powerful middle-class, urban, English-speaking Indian elite, and they convey this group's hegemonic values. Marxist critics of children's literature recognise the role such texts play in maintaining "the structure of relations between dominators and dominated" and perpetuating existing class structures by "reflect[ing] the needs of those who dominate the society" (Council on Interracial 1). Contemporary English-language children's novels, then, exist on a fractured ground, both resisting influence from the west *and* dominating on a national level. Thus, although these children's novels may initially appear innocuous and simple, they are actually powerful ideological tools, both because they resist cultural dominance in a postcolonial sense and because they are in the service of socioeconomic dominance on the national level. This can be problematic if a significant proportion of the population is excluded from textual representation, leading not only to a false impression of diversity, but also perpetuating power imbalances by imposing severe limitations on imagining which Indians have the capacity to shape the nation.

Before exploring the texts, it is important to create a clear outline of the national aspirations that are perpetuated within them, and although there are many, they can be considered according to several broad categories. Above all, the ideal vision of India perpetuated in these novels is the one I introduced in Chapter 3: a nation of harmony, where inclusiveness and unity ostensibly reign. All other preoccupations are either subsumed within or secondary to this goal. Therefore, as I discussed in Chapter 3, the resounding emphasis in the nation-building impetus of the texts is on acceptance and unity, in an effort to promote this vision of harmony by portraying characters that rely on cooperation and friendship to succeed.

In addition, Jagnnath Mohanty contends in "Storytelling to Promote Values" (2003) that values shaping contemporary Indian children's literature fit broadly into a few overarching categories: social, civic, moral, and spiritual (69). I will discuss the issue of spiritual values as they relate to a secular India shortly. More centrally, social, civic, and moral values are employed in shaping the ideal contemporary Indian nation. For instance, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, liberal feminist moral values shape the feminist aspiration to achieve gender equality in novels by Indian women writers.

There are also several further aspirations at play. More specific descriptions of social, civic, and moral aspirations are textually delineated through

a historical novel that I discuss at great length in this chapter: *Kamla's Story: The Saga of Our Freedom* (1997) by Surekha Panandiker, Ira Saxena, and Nilima Sinha. Although these goals are communicated at a point in the narrative set in the late-nineteenth century, they are generally representative of those disseminated throughout the contemporary novels in this sample that were published in India. First, there remains the need for industrial modernization, which is described in *Kamla's Story* as "a united effort to fight industrial backwardness." (78). Next, the need to protect the environment has been a long-term, ongoing focus and is communicated as "safeguard[ing] the interests of farmers" (78). The elimination of corruption is tagged "social justice," and the necessity of rejecting outmoded traditional customs is represented by "politically conscious people" (78). In *Kamla's Story* these specific goals are attributed to "Swami Vivekananda," an actual Indian Hindu spiritual leader. As a political leader, Nehru later also frequently reiterated the importance of these goals, in particular the need to modernise and industrialise (*Essential Writings* 27), as well as to eliminate communalism and casteism (*Essential Writings* 138–141).

Whereas industrialisation is largely portrayed as a given in the contemporary children's novels in this sample, protecting the environment, eliminating corruption, and rejecting outmoded social customs are central tasks. These goals are more clearly and extensively outlined in the children's text *Mission India*, which begins from the foundation of Nehru's historical goals—industrialisation and modernisation— at its foundation. Abdul Kalam identifies eleven tasks that "we want, as a nation, to achieve by 2020" (96). Significantly, this use of "we" is representative of the hegemonic group's values. The tasks include becoming a developed, self-reliant nation, becoming "one of the top five biggest economic powers" worldwide, and ensuring that "health and education services will reach all people" (96–97).

To achieve these aspirations, Abdul Kalam calls for children to "do their bit to help" and "contribute to the realisation of Vision 2020:" they are invited to do so by being "industrious" and "inventive," as well as doing their "civic duty" by participating "enthusiastically and creatively, in civic programmes in your school and neighbourhood" because "this can transform not only your immediate environment, but also India as a whole" (101–102). The children are then urged to "live up to" a ten-point oath, which includes promising to pursue education and resist discrimination of all kinds (gender, caste, religious, linguistic), to set a good example, to become "an enlightened citizen and make my family righteous," and to "celebrate the success of my country and my people" (102–103). These aspirations also constitute the ideology that the child characters in the novels perform. Like Abdul Kalam's imagined puppets, they act with apparent agency to succeed in realising national goals.

Obviously the goals in *Mission India* are shaped by a secular (as well as a liberal, capitalist) value system, and therefore it is important to understand the role of secularism in the Indian context. I have mentioned Jagnath Mohanty's

assertion that spiritual values shape Indian children's literature, but I argue that in the contemporary, English-language children's novels in this sample, the spiritual, in its religious sense, is largely—and deliberately—excluded. Where spiritual values exist, they are shown subtly as a Gandhian belief in the interconnectedness of humans with one another and with the natural world, as I discussed in Chapter 3.

However, Indian culture and society has traditionally been dramatically influenced by a plethora of religious traditions, particularly Hinduism, and the fact that most child characters in these novels neither refer to religion nor engage in any religious practice seems a meaningful absence. Although the occasional religious scene is present, such as in *Caravan to Tibet* (Agarwal 2007) when Debu, who is Hindu, privately prays to Hindu gods and goddesses and visits a Buddhist monastery, and although several works of historical fiction showcase communal intolerance and violence (which of course is overcome by child characters), religious references are otherwise primarily absent. Religion has no place in the daily lives of most child characters. This absence points to another failure in the apparent unity in diversity present within the texts. Whereas a few novels may mention in passing or casually refer to the fact that a character is Sikh or Muslim, these characters rarely engage in religious practice within the narratives, thus constituting a homogenised, secular childhood within the texts: their diversity is often mainly superficial. Further, where specific religious affiliation is *not* mentioned, subtle cues such as names and references to Hindu gods or customs alert the reader that characters are from Hindu families, thus perpetuating a near-invisible Hinducentrism in the novels.

The textual absence of religion can be largely explained by the fact that India was constitutionally structured as a secular nation-state after Independence. At that time, the powerful middle class that "dominated the independence movement" supported a secular liberal democracy because it "seemed then to be both a necessary and an adequate guarantee of sanity in a country that had experienced vivisection along communal lines" (Gore 170). Many Indians believed that no other political philosophy could accommodate the religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of India (Gore 55). In the Indian context, secularism means not only that state government is free of religious dominance but also, and equally important, that every citizen is free to practice his or her own religion and is constitutionally obligated to accept the religious practice of others as equally valid and valuable.

Indian secularism has not provided the panacea it seemed to offer, and many critics now question its role in India.[2] In practice, Indian secularism "meant only that the Indian State was not theocratic and, further, that it guaranteed an individual's and a community's freedom to follow its own religion"; in addition, "[e]ven today, in India, secularism does not mean freeing the life of an individual from religious dogma or from dominance and control by a priesthood" (Gore 178). The result is "a state without a religion but not a

political system which is insulated from religion" and a daily social life that is far from secular (Gore 178). Further, many of the egalitarian rights guaranteed in the secular Indian constitution have not been realised for all citizens, as traditional practices that preclude them continue despite the legislation of a secular government. Thus, although India is politically shaped by a secular constitution, it remains in daily practice a deeply religious society, as the vast majority of Indians actively practice one of the main religions, notably Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism.

One disturbing inequality perhaps enabled by Indian secularism, according to some critics, is Hinducentrism. Hinduism is only one religion among many practiced in India, but it is the dominant national religion because the majority of Indians subscribe to it (approximately 80%). Even more importantly, powerful Hindu political parties wield enormous influence nationally. In fact, political theorist Aditya Nigam has argued that "secular-nationalist discourse . . . was undergirded by a Hindu ethos and helped to preserve the power of the upper-caste Hindu elite" (310). Both Nigam and Gore also identify the hegemonic power of Hindu political parties and recognise that some Hindu fundamentalist politicians currently seek "to make religious identity—Hindutva—the core of our national identity" (Gore 178).[3] This issue has subtle implications in the contemporary English-language children's novels both from India and the diaspora, as many authors and characters are Hindu (a fact made clear even when characters do not actively practice the religion in daily life). Although Hinduism is in no way presented as superior to other religions, and the texts do not generally seem to promote "Hindutva" as a core characteristic of national identity, its textual dominance is worth noting.[4]

The discussion of Indian secularism is complex and multi-faceted, and recently critics have identified a multitude of potential problems with this philosophy, in particular its alleged role in perpetuating communalism. My task here is not to delineate the many problems critics have attributed to secularism, nor to suggest possible alternatives—these are tasks best left to political scientists. Rather, my focus is on one shortcoming of secularism which is particularly relevant to the children's novels in this sample: that the attempt to disinvest Indians from religious identity can result in a homogenised national identity, as it does in many of these children's novels. In the Introduction, I referred to Nehru's belief that the nation can be understood as a group memory. However, although Nehru recognised nationalism as "a sentiment which strengthens the sense of belonging" and "provides a focus for identity, a rallying point," he did not articulate which parameters defined nationalism, although these could potentially encompass geographic territory, language, ethnicity, religion, and/or other factors (Gore 70). This same absence characterises many Indian children's novels in this sample. The children are presented simply as *Indian*.

Because religious, linguistic, and caste loyalties are perceived as conflicting not only with one another but also with national loyalty, the Nehruvian

perspective encouraged only national loyalty (Gore 121). It is thus possible to view the hegemonic perpetuation of this doctrine of national unity in diversity as "a homogenising project" (Nigam 310). In such a system, encouraging Indians to identify first and foremost as *Indian*, rather than as members of specific religious, regional, linguistic, or caste subgroups becomes the key to building a national identity. In essence, this "homogenising project" values unity over diversity.

This homogenisation is seen by many as highly problematic. Whereas the idea of unity in diversity was "so central to the years of nationalist struggle and the building of the new nation state," it has recently "been displaced by an urgent need to question the nature of that unity" (Mee 318). However, such questioning is largely absent from many Indian children's novels in this sample, which primarily imagine India as unified, although in actuality it is comprised of many different groups whose interests may range from unrelated to competing. Some critics believe that Nehru's original aspirations for India are now outdated and problematic: Gore notes that recently "serious scholars" have questioned "the usefulness and validity of western liberal values like parliamentary democracy, secularism, egalitarianism, the pursuit of industrialisation and 'development' as values for our society" (99). Despite current debates, these values are generally staunchly upheld in the novels. As a result, many are only superficially diverse, and only then to uphold the hegemonic structure.

Sunder Rajan notes that because Indian nationalism depends upon unity in order to prevent "sectarian conflict and division," it "harbors contradictions at its core" which are "reflected" in children's fiction ("Fictions of Difference" 110). Deepa Agarwal has argued that one explanation for this is that publishers of Indian children's literature perpetuate such ideological values, thus forcing authors to comply with publication guidelines that reinforce hegemonic nationalist values. While recognising that authors' individual political beliefs influence their narrative decisions, Agarwal also notes that when children's literature is used "to develop a national identity," authors' creativity is repressed because they must try to balance the topics and events they wish to portray with "what would be acceptable to publishers" ("Negotiating the Maze" 13). Khorana expressed much the same idea twenty years earlier in 1988: "the realities of publishing . . . determine the content of the books written by Indian authors" ("The English Language Novel" 8).

Children's author and critic Poile Sengupta explains the magnitude of this phenomenon:

> Our national book breeding institutions lay down "rules"; writers must ensure that the manuscripts they submit uphold the principles of national unity, national and personal integrity, regional and religious tolerance, secularism, international understanding and global harmony. ("Writing" 141)

I have found evidence to support Sengupta's assertion. For example, many of the texts that most fiercely uphold a homogenised, hegemonic version of the Indian nation are produced by the government-funded publisher CBT. Publication requirements set out by CBT are clear, for instance specifying in one call for manuscripts that "stories must desirably adhere to our (Indian) progressive social conditions and should reflect the Indian concern and ethos" (qtd. in Menon, "Historical Survey" 35). This practise often leads to homogenised or essentialised portrayals within the novels. However, *Sita and the Forest Bandits* (Madhaven 2005), which I discussed in Chapter 3 as exceptional for its portrayal of strength in difference, is also published by CBT. On the other hand, the texts from Penguin, such as *Caravan to Tibet*, generally offer more diverse textual representations. Several of the more nuanced novels already discussed, including *Tin Fish*, *The Battle for No. 19*, and *Younguncle in the Himalayas*, are published by Penguin.

Nevertheless, *The Devil's Garden* (2006) by Shreekumar Varma is also published by Penguin, and this text presents a dramatically casteist, Hindu-centric ideological position. Obviously it is not possible to chart a clear pattern of ideology from particular publishers. There are examples of troubling portrayals from many houses. In *The Devil's Garden*, for example, readers are assured on the back cover that the setting, Pappudom, is a "normal run-of-the-mill" Indian village and are thus invited to view it as representing the nation in microcosm. Significantly, the narrator informs readers in the first chapter that characters' lives are shaped by the fact that "temple-time was strictly seven—whether it was morning or evening, weekday or weekend" (Varma 13), a statement that is never problematised or questioned by any character, although none of them is actually portrayed attending temple in the narrative.

Building from this benign assertion that the middle-class, upper-caste characters are practising Hindus, the characters' grandmother re-tells the "myth about how Kerala came up from the sea"; according to this tale, the area was created by "Sage Parasurama" who "wanted to establish an ideal land" (60), which he accomplished by bringing "Brahmins from the north" in order to "launch a new race of human beings, pure, intelligent, strong and beautiful—in fact, as *perfect* as humans could be" (61, emphasis mine). However, when some supernatural creatures prevent the Brahmins from completing their religious rituals, "a few of the most powerful Brahmins got together and decided to do something about the situation" (62) by conducting "the biggest religious ritual ever seen in the country" (63), which successfully banishes the creatures to the "Devil's Garden" (64) and creates peace. This myth positions Hindu religious practice as a source of power while upholding Brahmin supremacy and the separation of humans and others beings (which may symbolically stand in for lower castes). This is considered an ideal state and is upheld for centuries. At the outset of *The Devil's Garden* the conditions ensuring separation have been breached, leading to a problematic mixing:

> They are two different worlds. And we have spent centuries to see that it [*sic*] remains so. Now we are observing a violation. The Division is being scorned. Humans are crossing over into the forest. If we break the age-old pact, there will be chaos. (119)

This text supports traditional social structures and clearly resists new approaches to social interaction. Although *The Devil's Garden* is a work of fantasy, it uses powerful symbolism that conveys strong messages: the upper-caste, Hinducentric worldview upheld in this text is startlingly apparent in the re-told myth, a narrative that inspires the protagonist's actions throughout the novel. The case of *The Devil's Garden* suggests that textual inclusion of religious references can be as problematic as its exclusion, and that this pattern is not exclusive to any one publisher. The publication guidelines that Sengupta identifies as influencing the content of children's books neither succeed in eliminating discrimination nor for the most part truly support the idea of unity in diversity.

Suchismita Banerjee, on the other hand, claims that recently some publishers of Indian children's literature "have ventured into commissioning and promoting writing that focuses on the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of India" (9), which she believes is "commendable" (10). Nevertheless, she also recognises that "turning the spotlight on so-called 'marginal' communities by representing . . . and consciously portraying them in a favourable light" is often oversimplified and results in "mere tokenism" (11). Banerjee calls for more complex, nuanced, engaging representations.

These are crucial points to keep in mind as I discuss the way child characters in these novels perform the nation. As I will show, these novels act as a cultural channel that creates an outlet through which to imagine the Indian nation as it could and/or should be according to hegemonic values: this is achieved through the performance of the child characters. Contemporary English-language novels published for children in India showcase "good" Indian citizens who, by embodying certain character traits, dutifully build and maintain a modern, harmonious India. As does *Mission India,* the novels empower child readers to imagine themselves as active agents in shaping their nation according to shared cultural and societal value systems by portraying characters succeeding when they embody these value systems. The texts create a portrait of India as a progressive, secular nation where inclusiveness, acceptance, equality, and a celebration of strength in diversity that aligns with a hegemonic value system are generally the norm. Problematic or undesirable situations that do not reflect this portrait of the nation can usually be rectified—or perhaps homogenised—by child characters. Thus, the novels portray childhood optimistically as a powerful state in which social justice according to a hegemonic value system can be achieved as a result of child characters' efforts. Children's power in this fiction is a utopian representation of their future role as shapers, even leaders, of India, rather than most actual states of varied childhood experiences in India.

Agency Based on Passivity: The Nation Performed by Children

In addition to the paradox perpetuated in the novels by the apparent commitment to unity in diversity and the actual privileging of hegemonic, even Hinducentric, values and urban, middle-class characters, there is another significant contradiction at play: child characters appear to act with agency, yet they also absorb passively the hegemonic value systems of the authority figures around them. Indian child characters are celebrated when they unquestioningly subscribe to a system of shared Indian hegemonic values.

Stephens defines shared values as "contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture's past . . . and aspirations about the present and future" and notes that because children will carry forward such aspirations, children's authors attempt "to mould audience attitudes into 'desirable' forms, which can mean either an attempt to perpetuate certain values or to resist socially dominant values which particular writers oppose" (*Ideology and Language* 3). In Chapter 2 I demonstrated the way feminist aspirations shape Indian women writers' resistance to dominant Indian patriarchal social value systems. In relation to nationalism, Indian writers usually perpetuate the hegemonic values of secular liberalism and modernisation, even at the expense of members outside of this group. The assumption of shared sociocultural values as beneficial in shaping the nation into an ideal state is present overtly in *Kamla's Story* and more covertly in many other novels.

Kamla's Story makes an effective case study as a foundational text that showcases both the ways that patriotism and duty to the nation are communicated in these novels, as well as the idea that literature can play a vital role in fostering children's positive attitudes towards the nation. The internalisation of nationalism is the essential base from which all other more specific goals can arise. *Kamla's Story* provides an extreme example, as it reads like propaganda. Published in 1997, it was clearly meant to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence from Britain. The first two-thirds of this novel reads almost like a Platonic dialogue meant to convey history lessons, as the young Kamla listens to her grandfather narrating Indian historical events. Kamla's family is wealthy, highly educated, and well connected. Thus, Kamla is presented as a member of the intended audience's social group. Her family is also extremely politically engaged, and this premise provides ostensible legitimacy to the frame in this text: grandfather shapes his information as and through family stories, relating the brave deeds of a plethora of ancestors and relatives as they participated heroically in the struggle for Indian independence. Throughout his storytelling, he urges Kamla to follow in their footsteps.

This text's purpose, therefore, is not only to reclaim history and to tell the story of the Indian struggle for freedom from the perspective of the colonised (albeit from the hegemonic rather than subaltern position), but also to heat the passion of national pride and demonstrate how children can contribute to shaping the nation. Kamla easily absorbs her grandfather's lessons, and after

he finishes his stories, the extremely receptive Kamla's reaction models the appropriate response to the narrative:

> Kamla remained silent for a long time. . . . she stared into space, thinking . . . "*Purna Swaraj! Purna Swaraj* is my birthright!'" Kamla shouted standing up in the chair and shaking a fist. . . . "Don't worry, *Dadaji*, I am not afraid anymore. I will carry the flag. I will do Satyagraha. I will . . . like *Amma* and *Babuji*," promised Kamla. (144)

In case readers miss this rather obvious point, they are informed on the book's back cover that *Kamla's Story* is about "[t]he early stirrings, enduring of sufferings, non-cooperation in action, popular fervor, patriotic deeds and their perils, sacrifices, the triumph and tragedy" and that the "relevance abides ever, to value our freedom and to cherish it." The heavily connotative terminology here—sacrifices, triumph, value, freedom, cherish—hints that this story *should* stir patriotic feeling in a "good" Indian child. Most novels are substantially less conspicuous about this goal, but it is present in many texts, nevertheless. The crucial point here is that by telling stories, Kamla's grandfather turns the receptive young girl into a zealous patriot. This model illustrates a belief on the part of many adults that stories are a powerful source of influence over child readers.

One of the most important lessons Kamla's grandfather drives home is duty to the nation. He describes how he was affected by the 1897 speeches of "Swami Vivekananda" and relates their central message, by which he has lived ever since: "duty should be service to motherland" (66). This sense of duty is the foundation of all else in the texts—the Indian nation, value system, and character. Indeed, much later in *Kamla's Story*, one of Kamla's friends reiterates the same principle: "All young people should think about the country first and then about personal happiness" (194). Perhaps this is the ultimate, singular message conveyed throughout many of the contemporary novels, often by portraying child characters who act unselfishly and bravely in imagined contemporary scenarios while fighting Indian crime and corruption in order to establish social harmony. Less dramatically, children also pursue their education and simply act to help others on a domestic or community level, as *Mission India* suggests that real Indian children should.

Although both Kamla and her grandfather actively participate in the freedom struggle and act with apparent agency in doing so, they both passively accept the ideology disseminated to them through the authority figures they encounter. Kamla's passive receptivity establishes her as one of the many "good" Indian characters in these novels, each of whom is earnestly willing to participate in the task of building the ideal nation. The characters accept unquestioningly their duty to perpetuate the dominant ideology, which they accomplish by embodying the particular qualities of character necessary to do so. Kamla presents an extreme version of this unquestioning receptivity.

I will discuss shortly the ways in which Indian authors develop child characters whose heroic strength of character allows them to succeed in shaping the nation. Here, though, I focus solely on Kamla's receptivity, a crucial quality.

Kamla's Story utilises the third person omniscient point of view, thus privileging the narrator's perspective and knowledge, which often overrides Kamla's focalisation. Ultimately, this means that authority in the text lies with an adult perspective and value system—a pattern of focalisation consistent with the majority of English-language novels published for child readers (as opposed to young adult readers). Further, like many characters in these novels, Kamla is flat and underdeveloped. Her receptivity is her only important characteristic and provides the foundation from which all of her apparently active responses emerge. Indeed, the young girl is initially shown to be little more than an empty vessel waiting to be filled with her family's nation-building propaganda. Kamla has a name and a gender, but beyond these two features she is not described at all, let alone characterised. In fact, her only defining features are her curiosity about Indian history and her willingness both to listen attentively and accept unconditionally everything she is told.

At the outset of the narrative Kamla is passive, showing her willingness for receptivity: "Kamla did not understand. Nonetheless she listened as the elders continued with the conversation" (6). However, she soon begins to show some degree of involvement by expressing her emotions and asking questions: "Kamla looked shaken. She could not utter a word. Quietly she wiped her eyes and asked softly, 'What happened then, *Dada*?'"(47). She then asserts herself by demanding more information: "Kamla waited eagerly for her grandfather's story the next day. As soon as he picked up his hookah, she reminded him" (59).

Later in *Kamla's Story*, as she grows older, Kamla begins to act her part in (rather than simply listen to) Indian history throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Her receptivity, however, remains her primary defining feature, and she does little more than pursue the courses of action prescribed by her family. For example, when she wants to leave school to participate more actively in Satyagraha, her parents refuse permission, insisting that school is her current priority. She is "terribly disappointed" but obeys them even so and "devote[s] herself to her studies with a new enthusiasm" (162–163). Similarly, when her grandfather urges her to "become a lawyer and contribute the tradition of the family" because India needs "women lawyers to protect women's rights," Kamla immediately agrees: "I will definitely pursue law after my graduation, *Dadaji*. I will fight the cases of women and the downtrodden" (168). At every point, Kamla is a model of receptivity, following the path of duty as her family lays it out for her. Following my discussion of new Indian girls in Chapter 2, it is clear that patriarchal constraints along with, paradoxically, feminist aspirations combine with nationalist ideology to shape Kamla's behaviour.

Kamla, who is idealised as an admirable child, is primarily a listener in this text, just as children are the receivers of information in stories: Kamla's role parallels the implied role of the child reader. The reader should absorb and

emulate not only the values imparted in the story but also the behavior of the "good" characters. It is obvious that Kamla is an ideal Indian citizen, glorified as she is later in the text for her contributions to the struggle for Independence. This seemingly paradoxical combination of passivity and agency, powerlessness and power, is portrayed in many other characters throughout many novels and subtly conveyed as an appropriate attitude for the reader to adopt.

This portrayal of the implied reader positions child readers as the socially constructed "powerless objects of adult discourse" that David Rudd identifies as present in some works of children's literature (31). He argues that this "construct*ed* child" is a "*tabula rasa*—an 'empty' being on which society attempts to inscribe a particular identity" (35). In children's literature generally, evidence of the assumption of a socially constructed child is prolific, and this is revealed through narrative devices such as "speech tags, the instances of telling rather than showing, the intrusive narrators . . . the 'have to' tone" (35). In scholarly discussions of South Asian children's literature there is a clear assumption of a constructed child reader as an empty vessel who will come to embody the values portrayed within the texts; for example, one critic claims that "a child's book is a message, a communication between an adult and a child" that can "mould young minds and help them to grow and think on right lines," particularly in promoting "modern values" such as eliminating casteism, communalism, sexism and corruption (Berry 178–180). If child readers are as receptive as Kamla, they will surely achieve these aspirations.

Rudd argues, though, that real children are never merely constructs and that they can also adopt their own subject positions to establish their own value systems (31). He insists that "the child is necessarily both constructed and constructive" (39). I will show, however, that in contemporary, English-language children's novels published in India there is much more emphasis on the child as the constructed embodiment of the nation. Deviations from this portrayal are rare. Although child characters are active, take initiative, and apparently have strong agency, they are also generally constructed as passive embodiments of a hegemonic nationalist value system in that they are flat, puppet-like composites of several important characteristics.

The Importance of Strength of Character

Indian children's authors create attractive child characters that readers can admire and hopefully emulate. Although these characters are not developed or realistic, psychologically round characters, they are easily recognisable because they are primarily urban, middle-class children like the implied readers of the texts. From this foundation, admirable traits are granted to the characters so that they have recognisable strength of character. Character traits, rather than characterisation, establish the ideal, "good" Indian child characters that act heroically in the novels: these qualities of character are a vital component of

the nation-building strategies of the novels. Admirable character traits and strength of character are consistently shown to enable national aspirations. This pattern is particularly ingrained in the adventure-mystery genre, which accounts for one-third of the novels published in India in this sample. Significantly, this genre is a favourite of Indian children (Srinivasan 136). Sinha contends that its popularity is due to the way the child reader identifies with characters, becoming "transformed into a dashing hero who defies all odds to emerge triumphant in the end" ("Adventure and Mystery" 84). As such, these particular novels must be viewed as powerful ideology.

In *Goodly Is Our Heritage: Children's Literature, Empire, and the Certitude of Character* (2004) Rachna Singh examines colonial British children's literature to discern its role in empire-building and the instillation of a colonial mindset in its intended audience. Her thesis is also relevant to the use of character in nation-building in postcolonial children's literature. Singh argues that character building was one way that colonial ideology was internalised and that children's literature played a role in disseminating ideal behaviour (xxxvi). Substitute the word "postcolonial" and Singh's findings are also applicable to contemporary English-language children's novels published in India. Singh argues that character type can be used to "construct a child that both embodies and performs the nation" with the result that "[t]he nation is personified in the child" (312). In her examination of this literary phenomenon in colonial British children's literature, she identifies several qualities of character as central: "Courage, cooperation, discipline, a strong sense of duty, endurance, responsibility, resolve, resourcefulness, and a vast reserve of energy" (203). Ironically, in the Indian struggle to recover from colonial domination and to establish a unified national identity, these are precisely the characteristics embodied in the child characters in many of the novels. As I have already established, most markers that indicate individuality or deep affiliation with particular religious, ethnic, linguistic, or regional groups are conspicuously absent. Indeed, Singh argues that instead of individualism, "[c]haracter construed as ideal is assenting behavior that upholds the prevailing political and economic structure" (xxxvi). As the example of Kamla indicates, the same principle is equally valid in the postcolonial context.

The tasks of building an empire and of building an inclusive, unified and tolerant nation are quite different ones, however. Thus, I must make one important addition to Singh's list in order to apply it to the Indian context: acceptance. It is the quality of acceptance that distinguishes the textually imagined India as a nation of multicultural acceptance and facilitates unity, as I discussed in Chapter 3. Often, this acceptance is normalised as seemingly innate in child characters, but sometimes the struggle to establish it is central to the narrative. Acceptance is closely related to receptivity: child characters are presented as positive when, like Kamla, they unquestioningly internalise hegemonic value systems and when they unquestioningly accept differences among people, whether these differences stem from caste, class, religion, or

ability. Characters that deviate from this acceptance, or any of the other valuable character traits, are villainised.

A close examination of two representative texts, *The Blind Witness* (Dutta 1995) and *The Chandipur Jewels* (Sinha 2004), will demonstrate the way these elements of characters are praised and idealised in many of the novels. The relevant qualities of character in these texts and many others include: the ability to cooperate, which I have already discussed; duty, a concept I introduced in Chapter 2 as central to Indian society; courage; intelligence, and the ability to obey "good" adult authority figures while simultaneously showing the willingness and resourcefulness necessary to resist and overcome corrupt adults. Both sample texts are adventure-mystery novels and are resounding in their delivery of the message that strength of character is essential to the successful enactment of national aspirations. In the work of Sinha, Dutta, and others, children are intelligent and brave enough to overcome intolerant or corrupt adults. As I discussed in Chapter 3, corruption is a central concern in the texts, perhaps because in reality, corruption is a devastating and debilitating problem in Indian government at all levels. If corruption could be eliminated from Indian politics from the municipal level up, the country would come much closer to achieving its national ideals. Children's novels seem to offer a strategy for doing so: children with strength of character can defeat corruption within an idealised textual world.

In *The Chandipur Jewels*, three middle-class siblings work together, along with a low-caste servant's daughter, to retrieve their ancestral treasure from their grandfather's corrupt doctor. In doing so, they unwittingly engineer a family reunion between their grandfather and his estranged daughter—their mother—whom he disowned when she married their father because he was of a lower caste. In *The Blind Witness*, a seemingly helpless blind boy helps the police bring to justice a smuggling ring that steals ancient Indian artifacts and exports them to foreign collectors at exorbitant profit.[5] In the conclusions of both texts, a more just and harmonious state than was present at the story's outset is reached, an outcome attributed to children's actions and strength of character. They embody the principle of strength in difference, as the didactic message in both texts is resounding: everybody who wants to contribute to the task of shaping the nation into its ideal form has something valuable to offer.

Acceptance is perhaps the quality of character most crucial to the literary portrayal of a good Indian who can shape an ideal India in which harmony reigns. This quality is frequently portrayed as innate in younger children, with a dangerous tendency to wane during maturation—a tendency which requires reversal. In *The Chandipur Jewels*, acceptance of difference is foregrounded in the opening scene, when the siblings are traveling on the bus to visit the grandfather they have never met, due to his inability to accept their mother's marriage to their lower-caste father. Tellingly, it is the youngest sibling, ten-year-old Sunil, who observes in relation to family history, "[h]ow strange grown-ups were" (7). His extreme youth emphasises his uncorrupted

childhood status, and even his elder siblings, who support their parents' marriage, show their unconscious absorption of traditional attitudes such as their grandfather's:

> "Don't tell me you don't know, Sunil. A Rajput does not marry someone from another caste," explained Praveen. "Papa is not a Rajput. When Grandfather learnt Mummy wanted to marry Papa, he was furious" (7–8),

while seeming also to reject them; for example, Praveen later claims that only "old people think of all these things. Castes were invented in the olden days for efficient division of labour. But the old rules don't apply any longer" (33).

Similarly, it is the young Sunil who unquestioningly accepts and befriends the low-caste servant's daughter Munia, a character integral to the siblings' success in retrieving their ancestral treasure. In contrast, Sunil's older sister is shocked by Munia: "'What a strange looking girl!' thought Sarika. She looked about the same age as she was, but what a contrast! Sarika was fair, while Munia was dark" (13). Sunil experiences no shock, however, and simply accepts Munia as his equal, which he demonstrates by playing games with her outside. Sarika does come to accept the servant girl as well, but their relationship is never equal; indeed, Sarika teaches Munia to read, emphasising her superior social status. Sarika's impulse to help Munia, which is framed in the text as generous and thoughtful, also draws attention to her sense of duty—another essential quality of a good Indian, and one that will aid in shaping the nation towards its ideal.

In this case, Sarika acts as both a good Indian and a new Indian girl by educating Munia, and thus also contributes to the cause of eradicating outdated and harmful social customs (here the non-education of poor, rural, low-caste females). In accord with both a Gandhian value system and the goals outlined in *Mission India*, as a member of a higher class and caste and a more educated person, Sarika feels a duty to do whatever she can to aid Munia, who actually initiates the reading lessons:

> "Will you teach me how to read, Sarika *didi*?"
>
> "You mean you can't read?" asked Sarika, shocked.
>
> The head shook vigorously under the sheet. "Oh, you poor girl!" Sarika felt sorry for [Munia]. "Didn't you ever go to school?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Well, I will teach you then," said Sarika. Munia sat up, her eyes sparkling. "Oh will you? Will you really? . . . You are so good," she said. (34)

Eventually, Sarika and Munia do become friends, but they never become equals, as this quote foreshadows.

A strongly developed sense of duty is also a central characteristic of Ramu, the protagonist of *The Blind Witness.* This sense of duty bears up even under

extreme duress: Ramu feels a compulsion to tell the police what he knows about a serious crime even though he is sure they will not believe him. He also believes it necessary to fulfill their request for his aid in their quest to bring the criminals to justice even though he is afraid because it will put him in grave personal danger: "Ramu was sweating. Yet he felt cold rather than hot. With an effort he said, 'Yes, I will do it'" (Dutta 209). His determination to do his duty echoes the injunction in *Kamla's Story* for young people to put the nation before their personal happiness.

Duty alone is insufficient. This scene, along with many others in *The Blind Witness*, calls attention as well to Ramu's courage. In this case his moral courage is highlighted, thus accentuating another indispensable quality of a good Indian.[6] At other points in the narrative, his physical courage is similarly emphasised. For example, during one narrow escape from the criminals pursuing him, he acts heroically: "His only chance of survival, a very thin one at that, was to hang from the window-sill with his hands and let go the moment the killers entered the room. The forty feet plunge to the sidewalk below was sure to kill him" (178). Ramu's courage is rewarded in the most concrete terms possible: he survives. In case the reader manages to miss the importance of this incredible feat of courage, a respected police officer emphasises it: "'You are a truly brave boy,' Mr. Lalkaka said warmly" while also drawing attention to another facet of Ramu's courage: "What you have done, most boys with perfect eyesight couldn't have" (188).

Ramu is also characterised as intelligent, in that he is able to surmise logically the goodness or corruption of other Indians. Whereas the police officer's goodness is rapidly established with just a few clues—he is polite, understanding, intelligent, and well educated—and the corrupt villains are shown to be indubitably "bad" through their rude, crude speech and actions, there is one character whose moral status puzzles Ramu. He wonders how Mr. Gopalan "could be a bad man" when he "was one of the few persons who had behaved normally with Ramu, had encouraged him, taught him self-respect" (165). To make his final judgment, Ramu works through the man's qualities of character: "Uncle Gopalan had struck Ramu as a cheerful, kind and basically decent person," which eventually leads Ramu to the conclusion that he "could not be not a thief or a crook" because the "kindness in his voice was genuine" (168). This oversimplified version of who is good and who is bad is, in this text, given further credence because Ramu is shown to be less swayed by artificiality than sighted people: apparently, tone of voice is a more genuine measure of character than outward actions. Ramu's apparent disability is actually an ability superior to that of others around him, who are quick to condemn Gopalan (who was actually an undercover police officer). Once Ramu is confident that he understands who is good and who is bad, his forward progress never wavers. He acts courageously and dutifully, cooperating with the police to defeat the criminals. In turn, the police accept Ramu for who he is, supporting the particular challenges his disability cause him and capitalising on his strengths.

By embodying particular character traits and acting heroically, child characters in these novels are portrayed as powerful agents of transformation. They have the ability to secure national aspirations, and they are ultimately glorified in the narratives. For example, in *The Blind Witness* Ramu is rewarded for his actions: "Mr. Lalkaka had even recommended them for medals of valour. The recommendation had been accepted by the government" (247). When the siblings in *The Chandipur Jewels* act courageously, their grandfather is impressed. He judges their father's worth accordingly and finally accepts them, leading to a family reconciliation: "What a wonderful father you must be to have such brave children" (Sinha 64). The children are thrilled to experience, and to have engineered, this harmonious family state. Thus, the conclusion of *The Chandipur Jewels* presents a symbolic portrait of the family as the ideal, harmonious nation in microcosm: acceptance has finally overcome discrimination, and unity is achieved.

It is worth mentioning that in a few texts, this earnest portrayal of the "good" Indian is satirically mocked, but ultimately upheld. For instance in the school story *It Happened That Year* (1998) by Bubla Basu, five rebellious friends call themselves The Infamous Five.[7] Known to teachers at their school as nonconformist, they quickly realise that most adults will treat them well only if they act in socially desirable ways, many of which parallel those qualities and abilities of character discussed above. Together, The Infamous Five recognise and note that:

> If you want to be cared for, you must not be *1. Impertinent 2. Indolent 3. Dissatisfied 4. Distracted or 5. Flamboyant*. Remember, you can be cared for only if you are: *1. A Good Leader 2. Thoughtful 3. Focused and 4. Not Superficial*. (Basu 11)

Whereas they initially chafe against this social necessity, by the end of the text they have resoundingly adopted the attitudes they were so quick to mock. Indeed, even immediately after composing the list, one of the Five wonders, "But what's wrong with being those things? I mean, with being thoughtful and all that?" and another answers, "Nothing" (11). Rather than actually acting as nonconformists, the Infamous Five realise that they will be socially rewarded if they embody the characteristics of a good Indian, and like the characters in *The Blind Witness* and *The Chandipur Jewels*, they are. Such rewards, positioning child characters as heroic Indians who successfully enact national aspirations, offer attractive, inspiring role models for child readers.

Child characters steadfastly do what they believe is their duty, which is promoted to readers as such, by drawing on their strengths of character to shape the ideal Indian nation according to hegemonic aspirations that generally uphold current sociopolitical hierarchies. Children are positioned as the ideal citizens to perform the nation for paradoxical reasons: as passive receptors they easily absorb a hegemonic value system, and as active agents

they embody ideal character traits and act heroically to transform their social surroundings into imagined representations of the ideal nation.

Many contemporary, English-language novels published in India can be viewed as problematic not only in their reiteration of a hegemonic nationalist discourse, but also in their promise that children can achieve nationalist aspirations with relative ease. The oversimplification of complex Indian political situations is troubling and often produces inaccurate portrayals of the imagined nation, particularly in an apparent diversity that upon closer examination is revealed to attribute agency almost exclusively to urban, middle-class, upper-caste, often Hindu characters. However, as I have noted, oversimplification can be a shortcoming of children's literature generally, and it is difficult to discern whether nefarious political intentions or attitudes towards childhood as a state of innocence are more responsible. In the few texts that do expose political nuance, the acknowledgement of the nation's own complicity in past violence produces a complicated dialectic which both questions and upholds the nation but which still comfortably fits within the current parameters of children's literature, demonstrating that a high level of accuracy is possible, and that it is even compatible with optimistic national aspirations.

Regardless of thematic focus, the majority of contemporary English-language children's novels clearly portray Indian children's future roles as national leaders by fictionally imagining their ability to shape the nation. Problematically, though, this power is generally restricted to urban, middle-class, upper-caste children. The child characters' power may have no connection with reality, in that most Indian children are as disenfranchised as most other children around the world. As a body of texts, however, the novels in this sample deliver an overarching promise of empowerment and transformation, provided that imagined child characters, and perhaps by proxy real child readers, act in accordance with, and even embody, a hegemonic value system. Considering the nationalist aspirations of these novels, the sense of "Indianness" they portray is a crucial component, as I discuss next.

Chapter Five
Imagining "Indianness"

> Dad is a hip version of Einstein without the frizzy white hair or wrinkles. He drinks Glenlivet, smokes sweet-smelling pipes, listens to *Hair* the Broadway musical, goes to parties. Dad is one of a kind.
>
> Indianness is also rubbed into him like permanent dye. He taps his fingers to ragas, wears Kolapuri chappal sandals and drinks Darjeeling tea brimming with milk.
>
> (**Banerjee, Anjali 41–42.** *Maya Running*. **2005.**)

> We had so many interests in common: Pokemon cards and Beyblades; we thought Enid Blyton old fashioned and Hardy boys boring; as for Biggles, he was archaic. Instead, we preferred Philip Pullman and Roald Dahl, Tolkien and Jonathan Stroud. Best of all, we loved Harry Potter. We even invented a game where I was Harry and Alise, Hermione.
>
> (**Nair 46.** *Living Next Door to Alise.* **2007.**)

Signifying Culture

The novels in this sample contain powerful cultural markers, which I refer to as a sense of "Indianness." Signifying culture is an important task for Indian children's authors: as I established in Chapter 1, the novels in this sample are viewed by many as nation-building tools in India and are produced and disseminated within the realm of multicultural children's literature in the diaspora. Therefore, they must project a strong sense of cultural identity recognisable to readers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Indianness is thus imagined in these novels through a variety of textual techniques, including characterisation, which I discussed in Chapter 4, descriptions of clothing, which I discuss in Chapter 7, intertextuality, setting, and the practice of positioning recognisably

Indian objects as central to plot development. These last two techniques are my focus in this chapter, as they relate to the need of previously colonised nations to establish cultural markers in their literature. Significantly, all of the novels published in India are set in India, and half of the diasporic novels are set partially or wholly in India, suggesting that engagement with place is an important part of both postcolonial and multicultural children's literature. In some cases, particularly in several diasporic novels, the country of India effectively functions as another character in the narrative.

McGillis reports that in the past twenty years literature from India and other former British colonies "reveals an interest in national identity and pride separate from an attachment to England" (Introduction xxiii) and that one of the central functions of multicultural children's books is to "deal sensitively and accurately with cultures other than the dominant Anglo-European culture" (Introduction xxv). More specifically, Jean Webb contends that formerly suppressed cultures reflect "on landscape and a sense of cultural self" in their children's literature (72), which suggests a need to establish cultural representations independent of the oppressor. This is a crucial undertaking in the novels published in India. Further, in a multicultural literary context, parallel cultures have a similar need to reflect on place and culture, due to their position in relation to the dominant culture, and thus the reflection Webb identifies is similarly crucial in the diasporic novels. Whereas such reflection is an important task, it may be difficult to achieve with a significant degree of nuance in the relatively simplified texts usually considered best suited to, and therefore usually published for, a child audience.

In fact, the task of textually imagining Indianness may be an impossible one, given that despite the homogenising doctrine of unity in diversity, there *is* no single experience that can be considered "Indian," due to the vastly different situations of Indians from a multitude of backgrounds. The need to display recognisable cultural markers may lead to an essentialised portrayal of Indianness. In fact, rarely do the novels in this sample convey the sense that Indianness, if it could be said to exist at all, must be considered multi-faceted, constructed, and ever-changing, in the way that Stuart Hall describes cultural identity (2–4). Rather, Indianness generally tends to be conveyed as positive, and as a static fact, in that certain qualities, behaviours, or objects seem automatically to convey it. Indianness is often oversimplified, and sometimes even essentialised or exoticised, with the result that readers may be persuaded to conclude that Indianness can be reduced to eating Indian food, for example. The epigraph from *Maya Running*, for instance, seems to suggest that Indianness is synonymous with listening to certain music, wearing certain apparel, and consuming certain food.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the idea that some critics believe diasporic Indian children's literature should "bring out the best of Indian culture" (Sinha, "International Understanding" 13) and noted that this could lead to an oversimplified, overly positive cultural portrayal. Attempts to "bring

out the best" could also promote essentialisation of Indianness, in that certain qualities may be positioned as broadly representative of an imagined whole. Further, subtle pressure from the publishers of multicultural children's literature can lead to exoticisation of Indianness if authors feel compelled to provide recognisably "Indian" content that is attractive to a western audience. But such concerns are not exclusive to the diasporic texts: cultural essentialisation and exoticisation can also be problematic in the Indian novels.

Clearly, there is significant pressure on the children's authors in India to provide a strong sense of Indianness in their texts. English-language Indian children's literature is heavily influenced by western children's literature, and a complex relationship of imitation and invention results from this connection. Critics of Indian children's literature are aware of this imitative tendency, positioning it specifically in relation to language: "[c]hildren's books in English by Indian authors are obviously inspired by English and American authors" (Mohanty, Jagnath 71). This legacy has led to debates in which many critics have argued that foreign influences must be resisted and supplanted with Indian content: "The aim should not be to hermeneutically seal off children from such influences (even if it could be done) but to promote, somehow, the equally attractive alternatives" (Sengupta, Ranjana 82).

The critics' correlation of language with western influence locates this discussion in a larger postcolonial debate. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note that "[l]anguage becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated" and that "[s]uch power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice" (7). In *The Empire Writes Back*, "the discussion of post-colonial writing . . . is largely a discussion of the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture" (7). In my examination of contemporary, English-language children's novels, I am most concerned with the way the use of the English language, which is mired in the middle and upper classes, complicates these texts' aspirations to "wrest" themselves from British/western influence with moderate success and what is sometimes a rather empty victory due to oversimplification of cultural identity.

Critics have long called for more Indian content in children's books: in the aftermath of Independence, for example, "Indianness acquired new dimensions and new significance" with the result that in this sociopolitical milieu the "anxiety to assert . . . Indianness and national pride" was "reflected in children's books" (Rao, Mohini 68). This anxiety is evident in comments such as the following:

> A need has been felt by parents and teachers and others associated with children for providing Indian children with stories with Indian settings, having characters like themselves, with aspirations and ambitions like their own. (Shankar 260)

This perceived need for cultural representation has led to a publishing climate in which, according to Srinivasan, "Indian-English writers for children have to convey the Indian ethos attractively and authentically to become established and remain memorable" (24). But how, precisely, can a children's author hope to convey individual children's "aspirations and ambitions," or indeed *any* national ethos, particularly one as diverse and multi-faceted as India's, and particularly in the often simplified form of children's literature? The question most pertinent to my discussion here is the one that asks: who is given the power to decide what Indianness and "the Indian ethos" are? The question is further complicated by the apparent need to portray Indianness "attractively," which could lead to any number of skewed representations. In the case of these children's texts, the authors and publishers put forward their responses when they imagine versions of Indianness in the novels, sometimes perpetuating oversimplified, essentialised, or even exoticised stereotypes.

The focus on Indianness that Rao links with children's literature is actually part of a larger national context: the "development of an 'Indianness' free of chauvinistic regional markers among its citizenry is . . . one of the declared aspirations of the Indian State" (Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* 133). However, many postcolonial critics, including Sunder Rajan, question the possibility and costs of perpetuating such an identity, as this sort of propaganda can lead to essentialised notions of an apparently universally shared sense of Indianness. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions that Indianness is not synonymous with Hinduism: "'Indian-ness' is not a thing that exists. Reading Sanskrit scriptures, for example—I can't call that Indian, because after all, India is not just Hindu. That 'Indic' stuff is not India" (39). Deshpande similarly professes to reject the concept of Indianness (*Writing from the Margins* 41). Whether or not Indianness can be said to exist, most Indian children's writers and literary critics seem to act on the certainty that it does. If Rao and Srinivasan are correct that conveying a sense of Indianness is of crucial importance in contemporary English-language Indian children's fiction, and if the principle of valuing diversity is meant to provide the ideological foundation of Indianness, then any portrayal that values one group of Indians over others can be regarded as problematic in the novels. Perhaps in an attempt to avoid such portrayals, children's authors often position Indian food as a powerful cultural signifier and employ Indian settings in order to imbue the novels with a sense of Indianness. These cultural markers are particularly important when Indian authors utilise western forms such as the school story or the young adult problem novel.

The Indian "Blytonnade"

In Chapter 1 I introduced the idea that English-language Indian children's fiction, like the emerging English-language children's literature of many

formerly colonised nations, is largely imitative of western models. From the nineteenth century onwards, a significant volume of western classic and popular children's literature has been imported into India, where it was and is both distributed in English and translated into Indian languages. Until the 1970s, children who wanted or needed to read literature in English primarily turned to western sources (Srinivasan 24). This history provides some explanation for the level of imitation, which Sunder Rajan neatly summarises:

> Though the majority of children's books in India are adaptations, retellings, and even comic-strip renderings of Hindu myths, classics, and folklore or are Indianized versions of children's genres popular in the West (school stories and adventure and detective stories, for example), a small number are now specifically written from within a realistic, contemporary Indian context. ("Fictions of Difference" 101)

My focus here is the ways in which Indian children's authors choose to "Indianise" their texts—clearly a crucial task in relation to English-language literature. In fact, Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the concept of Indianness is relevant *only* to English-language Indian literature (*The Perishable Empire* 168).

An interesting example is the epigraph from *Living Next Door to Alise*, which may not seem to convey a strong sense of Indianness. The quotation is in many ways indistinguishable from any Anglophone children's story, particularly in its emphasis on British children's authors.[1] On the other hand, Alise is an elephant, and the mere fact that protagonist Siddharth lives next door to a working, domesticated elephant adequately conveys a sense of Indianness. This use of the elephant might, however, be subject to the criticism that the text exoticises Indianness. Indian storyteller and author Paro Anand reflects on the continuing prevalence of exoticism in conjunction with Indian children's fiction, implying that it seems fuelled by western expectations. For example, when Anand visited the United Kingdom to share some of her stories with a British audience, several audience members complained that her work did not "sound like Indian stories" ("Bridging Boundaries" 48). She retaliated:

> "I'm Indian, and I've written these stories, so yes, they are Indian stories. . . . [W]hat should Indian stories sound like?" Pat came the answers. "They should have magic, kings, queens, elephants and tigers." The stereotypes were jumping up and down, demanding attention. (48)

Anand's experience reflects the different cultural content visible to cultural insiders and outsiders. There is a great deal of content in the children's novels that signifies Indianness, although it may not be apparent to western readers, who may only be able to recognise—and thus demand—exoticised stereotypes. What is puzzling is that of the children's novels published in India in this sample, none are marketed in the west; nevertheless, approximately

one-third of the texts include one or more of the exotic elements Anand discusses: "magic, kings, queens, elephants and tigers." It is possible that Indian authors are manipulating exotic motifs, an idea I discuss more fully later in this chapter.

Concerns with exoticism rest uneasily beside anxiety over the belief that texts are not Indian enough. Many Indian critics of children's literature express despair when they track the historic and continuing influence of outside sources on the composition and production of contemporary, English-language children's fiction. A particular concern is Enid Blyton: from the mid-twentieth century until today, Blyton's books have been extremely popular in India (Leela 25). It is not surprising, then, that they inspired widespread imitation from Indian writers wishing to appeal to Indian children (Mohanty, Jagnath 71). Indeed, the influence of Blyton's most prolific forms, the school story and the adventure-mystery, maintained a stranglehold for many decades (Srinivasan 60). The antidote to western influence generally and to Blyton's influence specifically seems to be infusing English-language Indian children's literature with recognisably Indian content; Srinivasan calls this an "Indian alternative" (121) to western authors.

These "Indian alternatives" are saturated with domestic and national cultural markers. In adopting western forms such as the school story and the adventure-mystery story and infusing these genres with a sense of Indianness, Indian authors create a new form that I have identified as the Indian "Blytonnade," thus to some extent appropriating and reshaping a relic of the colonial period. The Blytonnades comprise more than a third of the Indian texts in this sample, and therefore they require specific attention. Although Helbig and Perkins have argued that little distinguishes some of these texts from their western counterparts (*Dictionary of Children's* 30 and 413), in actuality, the novels contain signifiers of Indianness which are appropriate to, and would likely be easily recognised by, Indian child readers. Such signifiers include Indian settings, names, and the centrality of Indian food or other culturally identifiable objects within the plot.

Indian children's authors have been vigilant in their attempts to infuse the Blytonnades with Indianness. This cultural content positions these novels as recognisably Indian—apparently a sufficient remedy against imitation, although certainly not against potential essentialisation or homogenisation. For example, one critic suggests that instead of reading Enid Blyton, Indian children should be given "Swapna Dutta's *Juneli at St Avila's*" (1992), which she identifies as "basically a Malory Towers clone, but starring" the clearly Indian characters of "Poonam and Harbinder" (Sengupta, Ranjana 82–83). Apparently this Indian Blytonnade is a suitable alternative to Blyton for Indian children solely because of its Indianness. Poonam and Harbinder are attractive alternatives simply because they are Indian, perhaps suggesting that Indian characters inhabiting an Indian landscape provide the appropriate cultural resonance, regardless of the fact that only a minute fraction of Indian girls attend such

prestigious, expensive boarding schools. It is the Indianness in these texts, then, that becomes the crucial and valuable component, regardless of nuance, and this is achieved by infusing Blyton's most popular forms, the school story and the adventure-mystery, with an overarching sense of Indianness.

Astute authors are well aware of the need to develop this sense of Indianness, particularly when they utilise western forms. For instance, the prolific Nilima Sinha is open about the degree to which Blyton influenced her own work. However, she also notes that when she entered the annual CBT book competition with *The Chandipur Jewels* in 1979, she had realised that even though she wanted to write a "mystery-adventure story of course!" she knew "it should not be based on the usual Enid Blyton. It should be very Indian, and convey some message," which she decided would be anti-casteism ("Writing Adventure Stories" 13). Sinha is acutely aware of the role of children's literature in the national political context, and she finds a strategy to perpetuate this hegemonic ideology. Although the book won first prize in the competition, Sinha's work was subsequently criticised for too closely resembling Blyton's ("Writing Adventure Stories" 13). She responded by turning to historical fiction, deciding that "patriotism" would be better received ("Writing Adventure Stories" 14) and ultimately collaborated with Panandikar and Saxena to write *Kamla's Story*, the most dramatic example of an essentialised, hegemonic portrayal of Indianness in this sample.

One common technique with which Sinha and many other Indian children's authors create novels that seem "very Indian" involves infusing the plot with tangible objects that are recognisably Indian, which child readers could conceivably imagine themselves touching or consuming, thus appealing to the perceived sensual nature of children. It is neither coincidental nor incidental that the objects the heroic child characters work to recover in sample novels I discussed in Chapter 5, *The Chandipur Jewels* (Sinha 2004) and *The Blind Witness* (Dutta 1995), are historical Indian artifacts. On the contrary, the nature of these objects plays a crucial part in the narrative, reinforcing the nation-building impetus and contributing to the sense of Indianness, even allowing for a sense of diversity in the case of *The Blind Witness*.

In fact, in *The Chandipur Jewels* another artifact, "a beautiful statue of Ganesha, elaborately carved and set with rubies" (Sinha 26), provides the clue that eventually allows the children to find their ancestral treasure. In its sequel, *Vanishing Trick at Chandipur* (2004), the plot revolves around the children recovering another stolen artifact, in this case a priceless silver urn. The happy ending is signaled by the last words of the story: "the urn is back again, and everything is as right as rain!" (142). By acting as protectors of cultural objects, child characters are shown to have a cultural sense of self: a self that recognises the value of the nation, desires to keep it intact and integrated, and believes it to be made only more beautiful and valuable with variety.

In *The Blind Witness* particularly, the description of the objects clearly links them with both the Indian past and positions them as symbolic of a diverse

nation. The police officer who describes the smuggling operation to Ramu makes this abundantly clear: he begins by explaining, "India, as you know, is a vast country, her civilization dating back thousands of years. We possess a veritable treasure of items of historical and religious value, icons, jewellery, paintings, sculptures and the like" (Dutta 191). This is an unmistakable signal to the reader to feel national pride in the country's heritage. So, indeed, is the fact that

> [w]ealthy collectors abroad are willing to pay astronomical sums for such antiques. There has of late been a tremendous interest in the west for Indian things, whether it be Indian philosophy, spirituality or antiques, (191)

even though the foreign demand is shown to be problematic, as the rightful home of these objects is clearly India. The diversity of the objects also provides a clue that all aspects of the nation should be considered equally valuable:

> An ancient Buddhist manuscript disappearing from the Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh. A Shiva "lingam", thousands of years old, taken from a famous South Indian temple. . . . A priceless *hookah*, made of bronze and inlaid with precious gems, used by a Mughal emperor. An ancient sculpture of Surya, the Sun God, on his horse-drawn chariot. A rare medieval musical instrument. A miniature ivory chess-set, used for generations by a royal family in Rajastan.(191–192)

It is not only Hindu artifacts that require and deserve protection, but also Muslim and Buddhist ones. Similarly, non-religious artifacts representing the arts (the musical instrument) and sciences (the chess-set, symbolising mathematics), are also worth protecting. Here Indianness is infinitely diverse, although admittedly reduced to convenient containment in a few exoticised objects.

Perhaps the simplification of cultural signification that results from using cultural objects as markers of Indianness has caused western critics to overlook other culturally specific features often present in the novels. For example, in the school story *It Happened That Year* (1998), the narrator explains that "Amita's mother was a widow who was battling the complexities of joint family living and trying hard to fight the odds against her" (Basu 18). A reader unfamiliar with Indian culture may easily miss the multitude of connotations implicit within this seemingly rather innocuous phrase. Such a reader might not even know what joint family living is, let alone be able to recognise its "complexities," and would likely not understand the Hindu stigma conferred by widowhood, here shorthanded to "the odds against her." Perhaps such subtlety is what leads some western reviewers and scholars to make unexamined comments such as the following: "Only the occasional Indian words, the names, and characteristic turns of phrase serve to identify the setting as Asian" in reference to *The Blind Witness* (Helbig and Perkins, *Dictionary of*

Children's 30). On the contrary, there is a great deal in *The Blind Witness* and other Blytonnades that signifies Indianness.

You Are What You Eat: Food as a Signifier of Indianness

Helbig and Perkins's comment demonstrates the need for a robust method through which to convey Indianness. It must be appropriate for and recognisable to a child audience and, therefore, tangible objects such as historical artifacts, clothing, and, most especially, food are particularly well suited to the task, even if this leads to oversimplification or essentialisation of Indianness. Perhaps such a signifier is even more effective when it can be recognised by non-Indians, thus imparting a slightly exotic flavour to the texts, which may position them well in the international market, as I discuss later in this chapter. In the case of the novels in this sample, both those produced in India and in the diaspora, Indian food seems to equal Indianness.[2]

The use of food is, therefore, political, but it also functions more simply to increase verisimilitude. In many texts, the inclusion of food effectively heightens the representation of daily life in India. For Indian readers, wherever they may be living, Indian food is a familiar signifier of real life. Even more powerfully, it provides a recognisable, shared, unifying feature of the nation. For readers unfamiliar with Indian culture, food can provide an interesting glimpse into daily life. Further, it has the capacity to convey a sense of cultural specificity in the diaspora. It is also significant, however, that Indian child characters never prepare Indian food; they simply consume it. Other characters, primarily mothers or servants, create Indian snacks and meals, which children passively accept, yet actively eat. The widespread use of food as a signifier of Indianness thus reinforces the paradox of the empowered yet constructed child that I discussed in Chapter 4. Adults dictate the terms of Indianness, while children receive it. As I discuss in Chapter 6, it is only in some diasporic novels that young protagonists actively grapple with their cultural identities. In many other texts in this sample, particularly those published in India, Indianness remains static and unproblematised.

Some critics take a strong position in dismissing food as an effective cultural signifier. For example, cultural anthropologist Brenda Beck argues that using “songs, traditional dress, handicrafts, special foods, and old-time stories” to expose people to a culture “treats tradition as a superficial phenomenon” (121). Similarly, multicultural children's literature expert Mingshui Cai contends that using the “four F's: food, festival, fashion, and folklore” in multicultural education is “superficial” (135). The danger of this approach in signifying cultural identity is apparent in the epigraph from *Maya Running*, which seems to offer a superficial explanation of Indianness, suggesting that it can be reduced to music, apparel, and food. Beck and Cai's concerns are well founded, in that using food and other external signifiers of culture often leads

to oversimplification or exoticisation of the culture, an outcome present in some of the novels in this sample.

However, there is also more depth to the use of food as a cultural signifier than initially meets the eye, and using food as a cultural signifier is not always an inherently superficial approach. Rather, food can provide a particularly tangible introduction to any culture, especially for a child audience. In some of the novels in this sample, food plays a significant rather than superficial role. On the other hand, I do not mean to suggest that food is the only noteworthy means through which Indian children's authors convey a sense of Indianness in their novels, as there are a great many. Food does, nevertheless, provide the scope here for a focused examination of the possibilities and limitations of such cultural representation in the texts.

It is well established in the study of children's literature that food is a central component in this body of writing as a whole (Daniel 2). Whereas seemingly normalised in many texts, food in children's literature is in actuality both powerful and highly symbolic: food is

> a particularly good vehicle for carrying culture's socialising messages: it acts to seduce readers; through mimesis it "naturalizes" the lesson being taught; and, through the visceral pleasures . . . it produces, it "sweetens" the discourse and encourages unreflexive acceptance of the moral thus delivered. (4)

More than this, food is a part of cultural construction and a deeply resonant indicator of national identity, with the subtle implication that "certain qualities in the foods traditionally consumed by each ethnic group are manifested in their national culture. In other words different foods *produce* different people" (14). On the other hand, rejection of another culture's food is often used as a synecdoche for racism in children's literature (18). It follows, then, that a mixing and sharing of foods can represent unity and acceptance. Indeed, in *Kamla's Story* (1997), Kamla's grandfather draws attention to an imagined earlier era of Hindu-Muslim "harmony" by citing their mutual respect of one another's foods and dietary customs: "Muslims maintained a Hindu kitchen for their Hindu friends; similarly the Hindus also made arrangements for their Muslim guests" (Panandiker, Saxena, and Sinha 22).

In English-language, contemporary Indian children's novels, food is a powerful tool that fosters a sense of national belonging, cultural identity, and pride, thereby fulfilling the ideological goals of these texts by establishing a positive sense of Indianness. The use of food is highly effective in children's literature not simply because children have the capacity to respond to it with great pleasure, but also because hunger is an inextinguishable drive that all children experience. By meeting that ongoing need with Indian food, the texts appeal to the bodies and the minds of the intended audiences of these texts. Further, there is a strong message in children's literature in general that

"eating healthy, natural food can produce natural, proper children" (Daniel 48). In these Indian novels the message is that eating Indian food can produce Indian children.

The inclusion of specifically Indian food can be seen as a conscious political choice rather than just a method of increasing mimesis, and this is particularly evident in the novels published in India. Indeed, drawing attention to the politics of food in a discussion of colonialism and children's literature, Rachna Singh discusses Indian authors' reactions to Blyton's influence on Indian children's literature. She analyses references to food in Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters* (2002), pointing out that one of the central characters objects to his sons reading Blyton's books because "they encouraged children 'to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged, made them hate themselves for being who they were, created confusion about their identity'" (84 qtd. in Singh 200). Singh notes that

> When Jehangir and his brother Murud fantasize about the food they read about in their Enid Blyton books, Yezad informs them that if they ever tasted that "insipid foreign stuff," instead of merely reading about it in "those blighted Blyton books," they would appreciate their mother's tasty Indian cooking. What they need, he tells them is "an Indian Blyton, to fascinate them with their own reality." (200)

What Yezad hoped for has become reality: all 101 texts in this sample, especially the Blytonnades, contain at least one—and often several—reference to food that is recognisably Indian. Further, the use of food is political in that there are many kinds of Indian food (most broadly North and South Indian food), which dovetails with the philosophy of unity in diversity.

These references to food can be either central or peripheral: what is important is their presence. Clearly, there is no shortage of examples to consider, but a mere few will suffice to illustrate the trend. In the novels published in India, food is often mentioned casually, as an unremarkable and normalised aspect of daily life. For instance, "[t]heir mother promised them gulab jamuns and bhajias for lunch" (Deshpande, *A Summer Adventure* 30); "Fazlu and I slipped inside for cold coffee and *mathri*" (Kacker, *Race to Win* 49); "Jayant was already gobbling down *puris* along with Vimla's special *alu sabzi* and tangy cucumber *raita*" (Agarwal, *Hilltop Mystery* 7–8), and "Suchitra's mother brought steaming hot *idlis*, chutney and *sambar* to the table" (Padmnabhan 26). Significantly, authors usually italicise the Indian language food terms, which draws attention to their Indianness. References to food are sometimes equally casual in the diasporic novels, but more often they are a source of emotional dissonance, as I discuss shortly.

In both India and the diaspora, textual references to specifically Indian foods are often connected with celebrations, calling to mind the powerful unifying function of food, as well as creating positive associations between

food and Indianness. These celebrations can be related to religion, such as *diwali*, to events related with and symbolic of social class, such as an end-of-year school dance, or they can even be rewards for excellent behavior. Regardless of the reason for the feast, Indian food adds an integral component to it, linking celebration, food, and Indianness. In one boarding school story, the feast at the school dance consists of "[m]utton biryani, rumali roti, matar paneer, raita" and the protagonist's comment that "all class parties had the same bloody food" normalises the ubiquitous presences of this Indian food (Chakravarti, *Tin Fish* 222). When the children are rewarded for their contributions to solving the mystery at the end of *The Hidden Treasure* (2006), they are told that "Kaki says she wants to give you all a special party and you can have whatever you want": whatever they want turns out to be gulab jamuns, shrikhand puri, batata vadas, papads, dosas, and bundi laddoos (Deshpande 257), which emphasises the children's love of and connection with the food of their culture and nation.

Whereas these inclusions of food usually seem to convey a unified sense of India, the North-South cultural divide is also conveyed through food in several novels published in India. An excellent example of this tension and its positive resolution occurs in *When Amma Went Away* (2002) by Devika Rangachari. Protagonist Nalini is immersed in her Northern Indian world of Delhi and feels disconnected from her Tamil roots. When her grandmother comes to stay, Nalini feels embarrassed by and hostile towards her grandmother's Southern clothing, language, and food. However, when her grandmother cooks the food for her birthday party, Nalini's friends respond positively: "The girls ate with great relish.'I love South Indian food,' said Aditi. . . . 'I have never eaten such wonderful things before,' sighed Renuka. 'Nalini, your grandmother is great!'" (80). As a result of this acceptance and endorsement of her grandmother's culture, signified through food, Nalini can finally accept her grandmother herself and feel "proud" (80). Nalini is finally happy that her grandmother is there, speculating that "[t]here had never been such elaborate meals as this one," smiling "happily and the smile broadened into a beam" at the "*payasam*" (80). Whereas food can be a source of shame or pride, it ultimately provides unity in the imagined India of these texts. If all Indian food is good food, then all Indians have something good to contribute to the nation, as does Nalini's grandmother to the family. As in *The Chandipur Jewels*, here family unity can be interpreted as symbolic of national unity.

Food conveys belonging or membership, whether this is regional, as in *When Amma Went Away*, or national. For example, when a character in *The Hilltop Mystery* (1999) by Deepa Agarwal has been away in America for several years, her re-acclimatisation to India is focused very much through food:

> "Mom told me to be very careful. She said I mustn't eat any raw fruit or vegetables. No food outside the house. No milk or dairy product. . . ."

> Jayant stared at her open-mouthed. “So, you can’t eat *kaafal*, or *samosas* and *jalebis* from the market, or *chaat* or raw cucumbers?”
>
> Meghna shook her head. . . .
>
> “Poor you! . . . You’re going to miss out on a lot of enjoyable things.” (14)

What Meghna is really excluded from, it is implied, is full participation and membership in Indian life, which Jayant clearly associates with eating certain foods.

Although some references to food can seem innocuous, when viewed as an overarching trend, the use of food as a means to convey Indianness becomes recognisably a nation-building technique. The use of food can also be overtly and intensely political, a nuanced example of which is explored in *Tin Fish* (Chakravarti 2005). Food’s link with colonialism in India, famously illuminated by Gandhi with his Salt March, is here connected to tinned food, which protagonist Barun’s grandmother associates with British *goras*. She denounces his family, particularly his mother, for buying (which involves a special trip to a certain market) and eating this food, saying, “I will not talk to people who do not know how to behave” (Chakravarti 72). Barun admits to himself that “Grandmother was right about one thing. We did a lot of sahib-type things,” citing birthday celebrations when

> Ma would open a tin of tuna, fry it in the pan, and then present an elaborate platter with potato chips, boiled carrots, beans and cauliflower, and a large hunk of bread. Of course, there would be Worcester sauce, and some Daw Sen’s French mustard, HP sauce and tobasco. For pudding, Ma would bring out some dark pink, strawberry-flavoured gelatine in a large glass bowl. This was jello, and we ate it with fresh cream. (74)

Barun enjoys this *gora* food as much as Indian food, but he comes to recognise its symbolic associations and power, becoming troubled by his own patterns of consumption.

As *Tin Fish* vividly illustrates, food becomes problematised within India’s relationship to the west. Food can provide both pleasure and unity, but it can also cause bitter rifts. This power of food to separate is frequently explored in the diasporic Indian children’s novels. For example, in *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* (Perkins 2005), Sunita develops a food metaphor to work out what makes her Indian: “People like the Morrisons and Schaeffers were made of apple pie and country clubs and stained glass windows and pot roast. The Sens were made of chicken curry and sarees and sitar music and incense” (Perkins 83). Sunita is convinced that what she perceives as Indianness is inferior to what she imagines as “Americanness.” In *Indie Girl* (Daswani 2007), Indie takes a similar approach when she notes that her family

> spent American holidays with other Indians, eating *tandoori* chicken instead of roast turkey and not even considering throwing around a football afterward. We were Americans, but we didn't barbeque our meat on outdoor grills . . . or *ever* drink milk with our meals. (96–97)

Cultural identity and affiliation are strongly signified through food.

As these examples illustrate, in the diasporic texts recognisably Indian food does not play the same celebratory role it does in those published in India. This can be partly explained by the fact that for Indian child and adolescent characters raised in the west, to be Indian is not to be proud, but to be fraught (see Chapter 6). Indianness is, at least initially, an ambivalent component of these characters' identities, and as such the nearly unwavering celebration of India is rarely present in the diasporic texts. To examine its more complicated representation in the texts, food provides a clear example of how Indianness can be problematised.

As in the children's novels from India, food is one of the strongest and most prevalent textual elements used to signify cultural identity. This may be due to the fact that most diapsoric characters do not speak any Indian languages, rarely return to India, and are deeply immersed in their western communities. Food provides a subtle yet ever-present way to infuse their lives with Indianness. If they cannot access their mother tongues, then at least they can be nourished by the food of their mother culture. For example, in *Born Confused* (Hidier 2002), Dimple's mother makes the connection between food and culture in a metaphor, insisting that her daughter is more Indian than she realises: "It isn't only food that goes through the umbilical cord, beta. . . . Memory and dreams and history—all the things of the third eye—these pass through, too, like spiritual food" (270). However, Dimple initially resists Indianness, particularly in relation to her sense of self—although, of course, she loves Indian food.

Whereas in India food is a source of pleasure and even reward for characters, in the diasporic novels characters have far more ambivalent reactions to Indian food, even while their non-Indian friends respond positively to the food, exoticising it. The consistent inclusion of Indian food in the diasporic novels and characters' ambivalence towards it clearly illustrate how the overriding sense of Indianness in these texts is problematised. Whereas young Indian characters may love to eat Indian food, this same food is often a source of embarrassment, particularly in the public sphere (frequently portrayed as the school cafeteria lunchtime setting). For example, a cafeteria scene in *Maya Running* (Banerjee 2005) shows several nuances at work. Protagonist Maya initially panics when she realises her lunch contains samosas: "At lunch, I am dead. How can we still have Indian leftovers? Mum must've frozen Mrs. Ghose's samosas and sneaked them into my lunch box" (46). Maya (wrongly) suspects that her mother is inflicting their Indian culture on her in the form of food. She also worries about her peers' reactions, but

this concern is assuaged when a popular representative of the dominant culture validates it:

> Jamie picks up a samosa and turns it around, examining the pastry from all angles. "Is this Indian food?"
> The table falls silent. I can hear my own shallow breathing.
> "Yeah, it's a samosa," I whisper.
> Silence.
> "Cool," Jamie says. "Trade you." (46–47)

It is not until Jamie makes this judgment that Maya can admit to herself, "Samosas *are* good. . . . I am no longer dead at lunch" (47). However, this is hardly a moment of empowerment, as Maya concludes that the "only thing better than eating samosas is watching Jamie Klassen eat samosas" (47). Jamie has all the power in this scene; Maya has none. Indianness is valuable primarily when it is designated so by a member of the dominant culture, in a telling echo of colonialism.

As a recent immigrant from India, Seema in Kashmira Sheth's *Blue Jasmine* (2004) experiences the opposite reaction to unfamiliar western food in the cafeteria: "I noticed a nauseating smell. It got stronger as I got closer to it. I realised it was the smell of food I'd never had in my life. I tried not to inhale the smell, but . . . I was overcome by it" (50). However, Seema quickly learns that food can show inclusion in or exclusion from the dominant culture and learns to accept and eat the unfamiliar food of the dominant culture after she breaks the (unspoken) cafeteria rules by infusing the public space with

> the whiff of cumin, ginger, and red pepper. I wondered if anyone thought my food smelled strange. Mommy had packed me *roti* bread, spicy peas, rice, plain yogurt, mango pickles that we had brought from India, and sweet *shiro*, made of semolina roasted in butter and flavoured with cardamom and saffron. (50)

Seema instantly recognises her cultural misstep and requests a "normal" lunch of a sandwich, fruit, and cookies the next day.

Soon, though, she becomes tired of such culinary monotony and begins to bring Indian food to school. She suspects that there is some opportunity to find a place for Indianness at school, especially after "Asha and Priya told me they took Indian food for lunch all the time" (116). Whereas Seema's close friends from various cultural backgrounds accept her food, and her Indianness, without question, the bully who has been plaguing her does not: "Carrie walked over from the bench across from me and said, 'I wish you would not bring such smelly lunches. It ruins my appetite'" (117). However, Seema immediately counters, "I will bring whatever I want to eat. If you don't like it, wear a mask" (117). This scene is a pivotal one in *Blue Jasmine*, and not long

afterwards Seema confronts her bully, converts her way of thinking, and they become close friends. Such an about-face may seem unlikely, but it is typical of the aspirational transformations so often portrayed in Indian children's novels, here showing the diasporic texts' insistence that multicultural harmony is possible and desirable, especially through intercultural friendship, as I discussed in Chapter 3.

Food creates a powerful link in the intercultural relationships portrayed in these texts. Even while protagonists may fear that their non-Indian peers will ridicule their food, their friends consistently respond positively to it. These friends either unquestioningly accept or eagerly admire Indianness and Indian culture, which sometimes borders on exoticisation, a reaction frequently conveyed through food: "'Your house is so exciting since your grandparents came. And your mom might have some leftover curry for me.' [Liz's] eyes lit up" (Perkins, *The Not-So* 11). Often, food provides the glue that secures intercultural friendships. For example, in *Bollywood Babes* (Dhami 2004), such a relationship centers around food:

> For months Mrs. Macey had never said a word to us because she didn't like living next door to an Indian family. That was all before Auntie arrived, of course. Auntie doesn't stand for any nonsense like that. She'd soon forced Mrs. Macey into coming round for coffee *and* being polite to us. Now Mrs. Macey comes round of her own free will, especially when Auntie's cooking curry. She's discovered she loves curry. (28)

As this scene illustrates, food can lead to a symbolic acceptance of Indianness.

Such acceptance is demonstrated dramatically in the resolution of *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* when Sunita finally overcomes her shame of being Indian and becomes open to sharing her culture with her friends. Sunita's newfound way of seeing the world, which includes acceptance of herself as Indian, peaks in the novel's final scene—her birthday party, at which her friends are both respectful of and fascinated by her family's Indian cultural customs. The birthday party centers around a feast of traditional Indian food that "Mom and Didu stayed up [late two nights in a row] sautéing, baking, simmering, frying, roasting, and steaming" (171) and which Sunita's friends eat from plates "load[ed] with food," enjoying the "huge five-course dinner" until they "fell groaning onto the big pillows in the Sens' family room" (175). All of the tensions in the novel are dissolved in this final scene. What had most embarrassed Sunita becomes the source of her—and her friends'—greatest pleasure.

These texts seem to suggest that eating Indian food signifies an Indian cultural identity. Indeed, even non-Indian characters who share Indian food with their Indian friends become part of what is ideologically conveyed as a healthy multicultural world. Consistently and persuasively, food is used in these texts as a symbol of Indianness, both in national and transnational/multicultural contexts. Whereas these suggestions do rely on essentialisation

and even exoticism, and whereas they do oversimplify Indianness to a significant degree, the use of food in these novels also provides a vivid, tangible means of signifying Indian culture through a textual medium. The success of food as a cultural signifier is its ability to convey both unity and variety in a simple, symbolic manner.

Positive Outcomes: Imagining the "Motherland"

I have introduced the ambivalence with which many young Indian protagonists in diasporic texts view their cultural heritage through a discussion of food as a signifier of Indianness. In addition to acting as a powerful cultural signifier in relation to young Indian characters, the presence of Indian food in the diasporic novels simultaneously functions to convey a sense of overall cultural specificity so that readers from all cultures can easily recognise the texts as Indian. Beyond this, it can even create a sense of exoticism, which I discuss further shortly. The need for strong cultural markers is related to the texts' place in the field of multicultural children's literature, which is predicated on the ideas that young readers from parallel cultures benefit from experiencing textual reflections of their own daily realities, and that readers from varied cultural backgrounds can learn about and come to respect cultures other than their own through textual encounters. In this context, then, the more dramatically Indianness can saturate a text, the more positive a response it is likely to generate.

A powerful way of imbuing these novels with a sense of Indianness while subtly re-framing characters' ambivalent attitudes towards it as more positive occurs when India is imagined as a source of wisdom. Many diasporic novels confirm the value of Indian culture by positioning India as a space in which positive change can occur. Whereas postcolonial literary critic Rajini Srikanth contends that in "South Asian American writing, the focus is not typically on an American protagonist who uses the backdrop of another country to reach self-knowledge" (68), this pattern *is* common in diasporic Indian novels for children and young adults (regardless of their country of publication). This use of the journey motif in and of itself validates Indian culture by drawing upon the "ancient idea in Indian thought and culture" that to "gain knowledge" one must "go away from home" (Pandey 162). Indian women writers seem particularly determined to convey "spiritual journeys" that result in "maturity of vision" (Bande 7), and indeed all of the diasporic children's novels I discuss in relation to the "motherland" trope are written by women.

The idea of journey itself is of primary importance. In fact, signalling Indianness through a return to India can even occur outside of the direct narrative, as in the conclusion of *Indie Girl* (2007) by Kavita Daswani, when the protagonist decides to spend the summer in Calcutta, volunteering at Mother Teresa's orphanage. Here, returning to India provides a way in which a young

Indian character can claim, embrace, and validate her Indianness. This decision is set against her other potential activities for the summer, such as interning at a fashion magazine or babysitting. That she chooses India confirms its importance and value, positioning Indianness positively.

Even from my brief description here it is likely apparent that India is positioned exotically in *Indie Girl*, and this is true of several texts. In *The Post-Colonial Exotic* (2001), Graham Huggan discusses the ongoing use of exotic motifs in postcolonial literature, indicating that global market trends place high value on "exoticist aesthetics," and that postcolonial authors, "working from within exoticist codes of representation," may meet those market needs with exotic content or even employ "strategic exoticism" to "subvert those codes" or to "redeplo[y] them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power" (32). I contend that diasporic Indian children's authors manipulate exotic representations of the Indian "motherland" in order to convey a vivid and easily recognisable sense of Indianness in their texts. In this way, they position Indianness as valuable while simultaneously positioning their novels attractively in the field of multicultural children's literature; their manipulation of exoticisation seems deliberate.

Reviews of several diasporic novels indicate that readers and reviewers seem to expect some level of cultural specificity, responding positively to texts which fulfil these expectations, sometimes even praising exoticisation. For example, the Amazon.com page for *Born Confused* includes two reviews from professional journals and an amazing eighty-six reviews from readers, most of which are positive; almost all of these directly mention culture and subtly position the novel as fulfilling the didactic aims of multicultural children's literature. *Publishers Weekly* praises *Born Confused* because "[t]he author seamlessly integrates descriptions of Indian food, dress and customs," while *School Library Journal* enthuses that "[t]he family background and richness in cultural information add a new level to the familiar girl-meets-boy story" ("Born Confused"). One reader review astutely observes that the novel "exposes the insatiable american [*sic*] craving for the cultural traditions of other countries" ("Born Confused"). The reviews of *Maya Running* listed on Anjali Banerjee's website indicate a similar response: *School Library Journal* claims that "[d]etails of the cultures and everyday life of both India and Canada are integrated seamlessly . . . readers will see themselves in the realistic characters," and *KLIATT* recommends the novel as "[p]erfect for multicultural collections" ("Maya Running"). These readers and critics respond to the novels in much the same manner as the protagonists' friends respond to Indianness.

Like some reviewers, characters' friends within the novels frequently react so positively to Indian culture that their reactions border on exoticisation, although these reactions may also present positive alternatives to racism, in that they at least value cultural diversity within a multicultural context. A complex example of exoticisation occurs in *Born Confused*, in which Dimple's best friend Gwyn is fascinated by and envious of Indianness, believing that it

provides Dimple with an authentic culture which Gwyn lacks. Gwyn encourages Dimple to wear more Indian clothes in an attempt to "put a little magic in lame old Springfield [New Jersey]" (Hidier 36), and she believes that Dimple's cousins look "like princesses" in Indian clothing, while Dimple insists "[t] hat's just how they dress" (174). When Gwyn persuades Dimple to take her shopping for Indian clothes in Jackson Heights (New York), Gwyn proclaims: "On to Exotica Central!" (144). Clearly, this is problematic; however, Gwyn's support of Indian culture does to some degree catalyse Dimple's re-evaluation and acceptance of herself as Indian. The salient point is that although problematic, exoticisation is also a source of power in the texts, particularly when characters visit India.

Perhaps paradoxically, it is when characters visit India, the source of the Indianness about which they feel such ambivalence, that they are often able to integrate their bicultural identities, and/or resolve other narrative conflicts. This apparent paradox is one way in which many diasporic Indian children's novels insist upon the value of Indian culture: what may have appeared negative is revealed as positive. When child and adolescent characters return to India, they often experience some kind of transformation that improves their lives significantly.[3] Visiting India is generally synonymous with forward progress in characters' personal growth. In this, the ultimate interaction with Indian culture, characters come to understand themselves, their Indianness, and their worlds better.

An engagement between place and self is one of the primary focuses of postcolonial literature (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* 9). Similarly, some critics of children's literature have examined the central place that place itself plays in this writing, recognising that setting can be crucial in creating a sense of national, regional, or cultural identity. For example, in her analysis of dozens of children's books published both historically and recently in Canada's westernmost province, Canadian children's literature expert Judith Saltman concludes that setting is so important in these texts that "British Columbia is almost a character as well as setting" ("From Sea and Cedar" 110). Saltman's identification of place as another character in the narrative can be fruitfully applied to diasporic Indian children's novels, particularly as India has often been conceptualised as a woman: Bharat Mata, or mother India. This trope is so widespread that Vineeta Vijayraghaven is able to play on it in the title of her diasporic young adult novel, *Motherland* (2002).

Within this traditional feminisation, it is possible to see India positioned textually as a mother to young Indian characters. Sheltered within her arms, they find new knowledge and understanding. It is not surprising, then, that most protagonists who travel back to India experience some important communion with a female character there, often a relative. By participating in feminine community, these characters are nurtured as they actively work through whatever problems plague them. In the context of multicultural children's literature, this positive portrayal of India as a space of wisdom allows

the diasporic Indian children's novels to create a positive textual world—and worldview—that promotes multicultural understanding and acceptance. As the sample of reviews I have provided indicates, the focus on India contributes to the project of multicultural literature by creating the opportunity to educate non-Indian readers about Indian culture. Descriptions of customs, lifestyles, and relationships are, unlike the textual positioning of the motherland itself, less often exoticised, and do offer glimpses into the quotidian and psychological reality of another country and culture, at least of the educated middle and upper classes.

However, the positioning of India as a positive signifier of Indianness can be seen as potentially problematic in its perpetuation of exoticism. In fact, as long ago as the 1930s it was recognised as problematic: India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, speculated on the paradoxical nature of the appellation Bharat Mata, noting that its connotations of "a beautiful lady, very old but ever-youthful in appearance, sad-eyed and forlorn, cruelly treated by aliens and outsiders, and calling upon her children to protect her" do not necessarily dovetail neatly with the fact that

> India is in the main the peasant and the worker, not beautiful to look at, for poverty is not beautiful. Does the beautiful lady of our imaginations represent the bare-bodied and bent workers in the fields and factories? Or the small group of those who have from ages past crushed the masses and exploited them, imposed cruel customs on them and made many of them untouchable? (*Essential Writings* 25)

For Nehru, exoticising and essentialising India by describing it as a beautiful, maternal woman was inaccurate and problematic; he was concerned that "[w]e seek to cover truth by the creatures of our imaginations and endeavour to escape from reality to a world of dreams" (25). This tendency is certainly a potential problem in the diasporic children's novels, which often dwell on the positive and exotic qualities of India. However, there are also some clear attempts to convey a more nuanced representation of India, and thus Indianness, in several of the novels. Many include details and observations that convey the poverty, suffering, and inequality that exist throughout India. When I identify India as a positive space of wisdom, I do not mean to imply that diasporic Indian children's authors completely ignore the ongoing social and political challenges in India, but rather that they position the motherland in an Orientalist manner in the charaters' lives, frequently attributing positive change to a journey to India.

Edward Said discusses the way the East and the West, or the Orient and the Occident, are positioned in a hierarchal binary in *Orientalism* (1978). He posits the idea that the Orient is ideologically and textually constructed in western cultural forms in a manner that relies on exoticising the Orient to demonstrate its indisputable difference from and inferiority to the Occident. For example, Said argues that in this representation, "The Oriental is

irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" (40). This belief system, according to Said, simultaneously inspired and justified colonialism, a system which benefits only the colonisers, as well as colouring and influencing all interpretations of and reactions to the Orient (39). I am not implying that a wholesale colonial Orientalism is present in these diasporic Indian children's novels, but rather that they contain echoes of this belief system which intersect in unexpected and paradoxical ways with the writers' attempts to convey a strong and positive sense of Indianness in the texts.

Young diasporic Indian protagonists confront a variety of difficulties, the majority of which are positively resolved when they visit the motherland. Bicultural identity is not their only concern, nor is it the only issue over which the motherland, in conjunction with the protagonist, has the power to enact change: a multitude of issues can be resolved within this cultural space. Further, characters can reach this positive resolution regardless of whether they understand their journeys to the motherland as exile or quest. What matters is what happens once they arrive, not how they got there.

None of the protagonists in *Monsoon Summer*, *Motherland*, or *Naming Maya* (2004) by Uma Krishnaswami wants to go to India; all are forced to go by their mothers. This certainty that India is inferior to their American homes is indicative of an Orientalist attitude. For example, in *Monsoon Summer*, Jasmine's mother has won a grant to start a medical maternity clinic. She is thrilled to return to her motherland, but Jasmine is resentful that spending the summer in India will take her away from her own life, namely running her small business with Steve, who is simultaneously her best friend, business partner, and unrequited love interest. However, India has a great deal to offer, as Jasmine finally recognises when, against the backdrop of "monsoon madness" and "people go[ing] crazy with joy when the rains come" (Perkins 43), she gains self-confidence.

One of Jasmine's problems is her poor self-image, which prevents her from approaching Steve romantically. Because she sees herself as "big, hunky . . . with shoulders as broad as her father's" (132) and as an "*Enormous Female from Overfed Continent*" (53), Jasmine does not believe Steve could ever be attracted to her. But while she is in India, Jasmine learns that according to the different value system there, her body type is revered and she is considered beautiful:

> You have a lovely figure. You're tall, womanly, full of health and strength—those are signs of prosperity in India. You have fair skin. . . . That is highly prized here, because it usually means you come from a higher caste. And your nose is nicely shaped and prominent. You have big eyes with dark, full eyebrows. All in all, you *are* a beautiful girl. (153)

Although Jasmine is disturbed by the casteist way in which she is received in India, she realises that she cannot change these traditional attitudes. Instead, she becomes open to seeing herself from an Indian perspective, which subtly

validates the importance of this Indian value system. Jasmine has also lost confidence in her judgment because of an error she made while managing their business. She overcomes her subsequent indecisive attitude when she makes the decision to aid financially her new friend Danita, a young, impoverished girl whose brilliant future as a clothing designer is jeopardised by the arranged marriage she feels compelled to accept in order to guarantee the security of her younger sisters. Jasmine uses the money she had been saving to buy a car to establish a revolving loan fund that aids Danita, which restores her professional confidence. Indeed, her relationship with Danita is shown as a catalyst for positive change.

Jasmine suspects that "some kind of monsoon magic had transformed *me*" in India (111). She interprets her accomplishments and changes in self-concept not as results of her own agency but rather as "monsoon gifts" that "had been designed for me, and me alone, strewn like treasures . . . in India"; as a result she feels "joy-filled," with "happiness . . . washing over me like a wave" (256). Her new confidence and contentment stand in direct contrast to her troubled frame of mind when she arrived in India. Jasmine's reaction certainly perpetuates exoticist aesthetics, but it also positions Indianness in a celebratory manner.

Like Jasmine, the protagonists of *Naming Maya* and *Motherland*, both named Maya, are forced by their mothers to return to India (respectively, due to familial obligations and to elicit culturally appropriate (non-sexual) behaviour). Against the backdrop of their large, extended maternal families, both girls experience newfound harmony with their mothers, and earlier strain in their mother-daughter relationships is eased in India. For example, in *Motherland*, Maya experiences a renewal of her relationship with her grandmother that is tragically shortened by her unexpected death, but which allows for an improvement in her distant relationship with her mother (this plot structure is similar to the pattern in *Naming Maya*). In *Motherland*, a new understanding between Maya and her mother opens up: "I had become more visible and intelligible to her, I had come into focus. . . . A closeness blossomed in these moments as she was losing her mother and I was finding mine" (Vijayraghaven 213). Maya comes to understand that her mother finally "wanted to be a mother, my mother—if she hadn't always, then at least from now on. It didn't mean we were going to be close or happy or understanding all the time, but it meant we had new aspirations" (230). The bitterness that Maya felt at the narrative's outset is resolved by its end, replaced with a new optimism about the future. The subtle ideology in the text is that this change could not have happened in the United States, but only in India.

These texts position India uncomplicatedly as a positive source of Indianness, synonymous with wisdom and personal progress. *Maya Running* also textually positions India this way, but this novel further relies on a particularly exotic, stereotyped sense of the motherland. Maya flees to India on a quest to resolve the chaos that she has created in her life due to her dissatisfaction with

her own Indianness and her desire to remain in Canada rather than move to California with her family. Maya's visit to India results in her new ability to cope with change, while simultaneously restoring her own life to its previous order. Maya becomes dissatisfied with herself when her cousin Pinky arrives from India to visit. She feels inferior to Pinky, who seems more attractive because she is more exotically Indian: "I sit perfectly still, taking in the ethereal beauty of Pinky, absorbing her Indianness" (Banerjee 85). Maya begins to wonder, "[w]hy don't I wear a dot on my forehead? Indian clothes? A sari?" (96), concluding that it is "[b]ecause I'm not Indian, not really. Pinky radiates India from every pore. She doesn't have to try. Her country is mapped in her soul, tattooed on her skin. Pinky is India" (97). Banerjee suggests that Pinky's beauty, her clothing, her physical movements are indicative of Indianness, and that this quality is something that Maya can and should strive for, thus exoticising but also validating Indianness.

Further, *Maya Running* exoticises Indianness by positioning Hindu religious practice as a magical quick fix rather than as a spiritual process. For example, Maya copes with her dissatisfaction by requesting wishes from the Hindu god Ganesh, as though he were a magical genie. True to his title as "The Remover of Obstacles," Ganesh does remove all the obstacles she names: these include forcing her parents to remain in Canada and forcing Pinky to return to India. However, Maya's wishes result in problematic ramifications that she never anticipated, and she very soon desires to reverse them, but this requires a journey to India to find the magical golden Ganesh statue that Pinky has taken with her. When Maya finds Ganesh, she pleads with him: "Please restore my family. . . . And the world. My wishes were a river with an undertow" (186–187).

Although it is in Canada that Maya recognises she has made a mess of her life, it is only in India that she is able to find the strategy with which to resolve it. Indeed, Maya sees her trip to the motherland as "sanctuary," recognising both that "I've come . . . to seek refuge from my wishes" and that "I can't tell where my wished-for world ends and the real world begins. India is the inside-out, upside-down other side of me" (173). India allows Maya to become less egocentric and more philanthropic, which highlights another way in which India enables positive growth. When she sees homeless children, Maya realises that "[t]hese are India's lost children, more lost than I am. I want to help them. . . . I could have helped them. But look what I used my wishes for" (168). Maya's final lesson in India culminates when she realises that she herself has the power to control her life. When Ganesh refuses to reverse Maya's wishes, arguing that "only you have the power to see the truth. . . . The answer lies within" (197), Maya recognises that the "answer has been staring at me all along" (199). Back home, she tells her parents, "I want you to return to your normal selves. . . . I am setting you free" (201). She restores her life instantly with just these few words. Suddenly, Maya feels far more secure and content than ever before:

> I am beginning to know who I am. . . .
>
> I am changeable, as transient as the seasons. My mother and father, my ancestors, the dust and heat of India, the northern lights and the snow melting on the prairies—I am all of this and none of this. I am special in a way that is bigger and older than this town.
>
> I am Mayasri Mukherjee. (209)

In this last section of the novel, Banerjee finally hints that cultural identity may be more complex than Maya had originally believed.

Whereas *Maya Running* exoticises Indianness and oversimplifies the role of a journey to India as a quick fix to solve several complex problems, *The Roller Birds of Rampur* (1991) by Indi Rana provides a more nuanced portrayal of India and Indianness. Similar to Maya in *Maya Running*, Sheila in *The Roller Birds of Rampur* voluntarily flees to India in desperation, looking for answers: "I knew I'd have to go back to India. I couldn't live in England any more, and nothing made any sense at all" (28). But whereas Sheila hopes to find certainty and absolute answers in India, she is initially disappointed by the contradictions she observes in India. However, Sheila very quickly realises that she must learn to accept these contrasts in order to survive there. She soon recognises that the contradictions she observes reflect her own bicultural identity, concluding that India is "*mine*, for me to discover. That's *me* out here!" (39). As she navigates the geography, customs and politics of life in India, learning to understand and reconcile the contradictions everywhere inherent within them, she is finally able to do the same with her own bicultural identity.

Sheila's journey to India is shown within the text to "cure" the nervous breakdown towards which she had been plummeting by enabling her to resolve her identity crisis. Nurtured by the motherland and her maternal relatives, she finds peace and acceptance, which ameliorate her psychological and emotional angst. Initially, she believes this is because India offers a simple way of understanding life. Sheila needs to feel the security she believes the motherland offers. Her first response to what she perceives as the simplicity of Indian life is the urge to immerse herself permanently within it by moving there:

> I was feeling connected, part of the process of village life. I was in love with these people! They had beliefs, traditions, rituals. . . . They had certainty, they had the calm nerves and relaxed muscles which went with not having spasms of anxiety, doubts about the rights and wrongs of life. They had peaceful, positive thoughts. . . . I knew I couldn't become a villager . . . but I could at least live in India. (153)

However, Sheila soon comes to realise that India is far from a place of cultural simplicity or certain answers. Further, when she witnesses a terrifyingly

violent bandit attack in the neighbouring village, the illusion of India's security is finally shattered. Sheila must look at her motherland more realistically, as a place both with answers and nurture *and* one which is confusingly complex and threateningly insecure. She is ultimately able to do so. It is significant, however, that she does ultimately return to the United Kingdom, rejecting her earlier inclination to move to India.

In fact, every diasporic Indian character in these novels chooses to return to the west rather than to stay in India. These characters, although they are affected by the Indianness of the motherland, are also deeply attached to the idea of home, understanding themselves as intricately connected with the place(s) in which they exist. Further, they recognise their homes in the west as valuable because they offer superior lifestyles and opportunities, particularly in relation to education. These characters return to India to drink from the source of the motherland, fortify themselves on her nectar—Indianness—and depart the richer, in a quintessentially orientalist journey. Indianness is validated, although in and of itself, it ultimately does not offer enough for the diasporic characters.

Whereas the novels published in India seem to suggest that an essential, simple sense of Indianness can provide an antidote to western influence, in the diasporic texts a more complex blending is explored. In this sense, the texts seem to open the possibility of cultural sharing and mixing: this is not a new idea, nor one supported only by diasporic Indians. For example, Gandhi believed that India was a "microcosm of the world" in that its civilisation was a "synthesis of different cultures" (qtd. in Parekh 39). Similarly, Nehru believed that although India had a shared "cultural basis . . . strong enough to endure," he also recognised in *The Discovery of India* that the culture was "changing and progressing all the time" by "coming into intimate contact with" many other cultures, thus experiencing and effecting mutual cultural change (*Essential Writings* 3). He not only accepted but endorsed this interaction and change. Although Nehru frequently discussed cultural unity, as I outlined in Chapter 3, he also recognised

> how very difficult it was for me or for anyone else to grasp the ideas [India] embodied. It was not her wide spaces that eluded me, or even her diversity, but some depth of soul which I could not fathom. . . . She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. (*Essential Writings* 7)

Gandhi, Nehru, and many other influential contemporary Indians support the idea that India has long been culturally syncretic (I discuss this concept fully in Chapter 6). Rather than being reducible to one essentialised, representative culture, the way in which I have argued that many children's novels in this sample often represent Indianness, this position suggests that Indian cultural identity is indefinable, that it is in an ongoing state of flux, and that it is constantly

influenced by interaction with a multitude of outside sources. Although this fluidity is largely absent in the children's novels' representation of Indianness, the idea of cultural syncretism *is* central to the way Indian children's authors imagine bicultural identity in the diasporic texts, as I discuss next.

Chapter Six

Imagining Identity in the Diaspora: Performing a "Masala" Self

"Does every boy in all India *have* to be what his father is?"

"Of course. . . ."

"But why must I do what my father does when I don't want to?"

"Why, it is the custom, son." His mother's eyes were big with surprise that he should even ask. "A child's future is written on the forehead at birth by the gods. He follows in the footsteps of his father. You know that."

(Lal Singh and Lownsbery 135. *Gift of the Forest.* **1942.)**

"It's a term we have in India for second-generation South Asians from the States. It stands for American Born Confused Desi". . . .

So I was an ABCD. Why hadn't anyone told me. . . . I [was] not alone in my confusion?

(Hidier 100–104)

Textual Preoccupations with Cultural Identity

Whereas I have established that in most novels in this sample there is little sense that Indianness is constructed or fluid, several of the diasporic Indian children's novels do portray young second-generation Indian characters' bicultural identities in this way. I discuss identity as "bicultural" because almost all diasporic characters view themselves as simultaneously Indian and British, American, or Canadian (depending on the country in which they live). In these texts, protagonists try to make sense of this duality at the individual level by grappling with issues of their bicultural identity, consciously examining the ways they are socially coerced into believing they are "Indian,"

and manipulating these and other aspects of subjectivity to negotiate a sense of self which satisfies them because it includes elements which they consider both Indian and western.

A clear example of the gist of this struggle is contained in *A Group of One* (2001) by Rachna Gilmore. The protagonist, Tara, refuses to be "a carbon copy" of her Indian mother or singled out as Indian by her teacher (10),[1] resents various people who label her "Indian enough, not Indian enough . . . too Indian" (41), resists having an identity "thrust upon" her by others (60), and insists that she is both "a group of one" (115) and, during a public outburst in her class, "a regular Canadian" (152). Although Tara does not experience an identity crisis, she does analyse and perform her bicultural identity throughout the narrative.

Several characters, however, do experience identity crises. In this chapter I discuss various narrative patterns through which protagonists are portrayed as facing these crises directly by engaging with their bicultural identities. One of the major preoccupations of these texts, then, is cultural identity development—especially in the novels published for a young adult audience, which often feature protagonists in the throes of an identity crisis. Whether representations of identity crises in British or American texts actually do "describe the experiences" of Indian youth in the west, as Khorana decreed diasporic Indian children's literature should, is difficult to ascertain, and whether these stories can help young second-generation Indians "to face their problems with confidence," as Sinha prescribed, is also difficult to know. Nevertheless, it is significant that the focus on identity does reflect genre conventions of western young adult and multicultural children's literature. These conventions may play the strongest role in scripting the way bicultural identity is explored in novels such as *The Roller Birds of Rampur* (Rana 1991), *Born Confused* (Hidier 2002), and *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* (Perkins 2005), three diasporic Indian novels that feature adolescent protagonists and are published for a young adult audience.

Before discussing these texts and several others in more detail, a few points are necessary. First, it is a mistake to believe that any one textual representation could typify "the" experience of Indian youth in the west in reality. Although the novels clearly explore how characters' understanding of themselves as Indians is complicated by their upbringing in the west, I do not mean to imply that any one text discussed here or that children's literature written by Indian authors living in the west as a whole can necessarily be seen to reflect the sprawling diversity of actual experiences. Rather, the strategies these authors imagine as viable ways to approach bicultural identity are best viewed as aspirational suggestions. Further, whereas for the purposes of streamlined communication I refer to characters' Indian family or culture, this is obviously not a single category: at the very least, it is inflected by region of family origin, country and region of relocation, caste, class, language, religion, and gender. However, the category "Indian" is often collapsed in the novels, when

characters frequently self-refer as Indian, rather than, for example, as a high-caste, upper-class, suburban Hindu girl whose physician parents emigrated from Mumbai and Gujarat to New Jersey and who speak Hindi, Marathi, and Gujarati. These details more fully describe Dimple in *Born Confused*, who considers herself simply Indian.

It is also important to note that issues focusing on identity, and bicultural identity, are neither exclusive to nor the exclusive focus of the Indian children's novels of the diaspora. For example, recently a few young adult novels published in India have explicitly explored these issues in a manner much more nuanced than in the diaspora. Suchismita Banerjee argues that *When Amma Went Away* "explores the conflicts faced by children when they are faced with constructing an identity that accommodates elements of their 'native' culture while living in a cosmopolitan environment" (15). Although Banerjee uses the term "children," the protagonist Nalini is actually fourteen—an adolescent. Similarly, the protagonists in *Tin Fish* (Chakravarti 2005), *The Year I Turned 16* (Khanna 2006), and *A Girl Like Me* (Kaushal 2008) are all adolescents, and perhaps it is not coincidental that these narratives also explicitly explore subjectivity in a particularly complex manner, examining how caste, class, language, region, and religion affect the characters' changing ideas of who they are in an approach different from texts featuring younger characters. Further, in the diaspora many novels do not introduce cultural identity crises as the narrative conflict. This is especially true of novels featuring younger protagonists and works of fantasy, such as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Rushdie 1990) and *The Conch Bearer* (Divakaruni 2003), but it is equally true of some realistic novels featuring adolescent protagonists, such as Narinder Dhami's Babes series (2003–2005). On the other hand, there are some structural patterns within the diasporic texts consistent enough to merit closer consideration.

Characters' narrative preoccupation with cultural identity could be explained by their position within what has been described by sociologists as the "Third Culture," a liminal space inhabited by "children of parents of one culture" who "grow up in a second culture" (Stahl 50). These children are often discussed as "second-generation," indicating that they are either born in the west or emigrate from their countries of origin when they are very young; second-generation Indians often seem to consider their country of origin as somewhere to visit rather than home, identifying more closely with the lifestyles and values of the western cultures in which they are raised (Rayaprol 131 and 139; Blad 72). This liminal space is sometimes viewed by adults as emotionally challenging for children, who may not experience it as such. For example, in a series of interviews with second-generation Indian youth in the United States, sociologist Aparna Rayaprol discovered that when presented with the term "ABCD" (American Born Confused Desi) many were "offended," dismissing the notion that they suffer from any "identity crisis" (138–139). Similarly, cultural anthropologist Sunaina Maira contends that "[s]econd-generation youth learn in childhood that they have to negotiate

different ideals of youthful behavior in specific contexts and select certain images or identification within particular social and structural constraints" (92) and that although these performances and identifications may cause unease or even guilt, they can nevertheless be navigated competently and without trauma (93–95).

Fictional characters in diasporic children's literature are, however, often portrayed as experiencing mild to severe emotional trauma in negotiating the Third Culture. It is possible that several texts manipulate or perpetuate stereotypes of cultural identity as a source of trauma in attempt to provide stimulating narrative conflict and to fit comfortably within the genre conventions typical of multicultural children's literature and young adult fiction. The growth of both these genres seems to have helped enable the eventual growth of diasporic Indian children's literature and partially explain the texts' focus on identity. The duality in regards to bicultural identity may be due to the texts' place in the realm of multicultural children's literature, in which "the common metanarrative" is "the loss and reclaiming of subjectivity" (Stephens and Lee 2). The diasporic Indian novels I discuss in this chapter also demonstrate "the ameliorative or positive versions of this metanarrative that prevail in children's literature," in that each "traces movement from difference to subjective agency, celebrates hybridity, and affirms tolerance" (Stephens and Sung 2). It is essential to view the texts under discussion in this chapter within these genre conventions.

Cultural identity is the frequent focus of much multicultural children's literature; indeed, identity may even be a "universal" theme in this context (Cai 126). For instance, western multicultural children's literature from a variety of Asian cultures (a "category" in which Indian texts are often placed) addresses issues of bicultural identity and identity politics—these include Thai, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (Thongthiraj 237). These textual foci are so frequent and so structurally similar that George Shannon has identified a typical process by which young bicultural characters "experience culture" in multicultural children's literature: the stages progress from the "acceptance of (or by) one culture, with denial of the other," to the "attempt to belong to both conflicting cultures at once," and finally result in "the acknowledgment and acceptance of individuality and an evolving identity as a collage of cultures" (qtd. in Dresang 137). This reductive formula is consistent with the pattern of bicultural identity formation in the diasporic novels I discuss here.

In addition to educating a variety of readers about Indian culture, there seems to be another pedagogical goal present in the texts: to provide young second-generation Indian readers with strategies for understanding and developing their own identities in the west. In this deep focus on cultural identity, nationality and ethnicity are examined yet normative ideologies in relation to class, sexuality, and even race remain unexamined. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that textual preoccupation with identity is central in young adult fiction,

which often portrays young characters learning to accept the powerful societal forces with which they are surrounded. Trites observes that

> in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class. (3)

Trites posits the idea that much young adult fiction teaches adolescent readers their power is limited to the personal sphere and encourages them to accept these institutions and the power structures they perpetuate (7). This is certainly true of the novels I discuss here, which encourage a simplified approach to cultural identity that leaves undisturbed other sociopolitical power structures and which supports dominant western myths about multicultural harmony.

With these commonalities apparent, what, then, makes these texts particularly "Indian"? In his Introduction to *Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatriate* (2003), Amitava Kumar recognises that there has been a "recent onslaught of books and films around the theme of ABCDs," and argues that these narratives explore a "hybrid or masala self" that is "held up as an essentially Indian trait, a trait which the Indian abroad is able to embody" (xvi). This "masala self" is the focus of many diasporic Indian children's novels and is particularly evident in *The Roller Birds of Rampur*, *Born Confused*, and *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*. Kumar's use of the term "masala" conveys a positive connotation, as it refers to a blend of spices used to add delicious flavour to Indian cuisine. Such a masala self is portrayed in many novels as one that allows protagonists to achieve an emotionally comfortable bicultural identity. In these texts, protagonists try to make sense of what is portrayed as a troubling duality at the individual level by grappling with issues of their bicultural identity, consciously examining the ways they are socially coerced into believing they are Indian, and manipulating these and other aspects of subjectivity to negotiate a sense of self which satisfies them because it includes elements which they consider both Indian and western.

Whereas it is may be true that such narrative resolution could provide a reductive comfort for readers "caught between cultures," as Perkins describes her intended audience, there are also problems related to the approach in that it fails to acknowledge the ways that "*all* social actors routinely manage multiple cultural frameworks" and thus positions second-generation Indians as "devia[nt] from a monocultural norm"; further, the preoccupation with ethnicity and nationality "let gender, class, race, and other dimensions drop out of the picture" while creating "a particular politics of 'culture' in which immigrant families are positioned as outsiders to the nation" (Maira 101). On the other hand, the novels do the important work of representing young second-generation Indian characters continually performing varying versions of their

bicultural identities, demonstrating that these are actually constructed and fluid. Characters vigorously question what it means to be Indian, examining the traditional parameters of cultural identity often espoused by their parents, relatives, and the older members of the various Indian communities of which they are a part, just the way Trites describes adolescent characters both questioning and accepting social forces. Their "success" constitutes an ideological prescription proffered by diasporic Indian authors of children's literature.

As I have established, a significant number of novels preoccupied with bicultural identity development have emerged in the diaspora: this thematic focus is central to approximately half of the novels published outside of India. These seem to promote several strategies for successfully achieving an emotionally comfortable bicultural identity: I discuss these as assimilation, transitional identity, and syncretic bicultural identity, terms I define later in the discussion. Whereas these strategies vary, particularly in the degree to which they position bicultural identity as fluid and constructed, they all promise that some degree of certainty and satisfaction can be achieved by characters who actively engage with their bicultural identities. This sense of satisfaction usually comprises the narrative conclusion, resolving textual conflict, and thus it is ideologically flagged as positive.

The Pull of the Dominant Culture: Assimilation and Transitional Identity

As I discussed in Chaper 5, the diasporic Indian children's novels are generally set in an imagined, diverse, accepting multicultural community, a setting consistent across place of publication. Whereas characters undoubtedly contend with xenophobia and racism, this is not usually portrayed as the central narrative conflict. Instead, the backdrop of a generally accepting, inclusive society is used in many texts as an appropriately supportive environment in which characters have the freedom to wrestle with their own cultural identities. It is significant that even when young diasporic Indian characters are aware that their own parallel culture is ostensibly acceptable, even valuable, within the milieu of their multicultural societies, most characters are equally aware that the dominant culture is more powerful and thus, by extension, more desirable. For some characters, their strongest adversaries are not racist members of the dominant culture, but rather themselves, as they are the ones who most insistently disparage Indian culture and limit the degree to which they consider themselves Indian. These characters long for membership in the dominant culture while also identifying strongly with their mother culture, which causes unbearable psychological dissonance that must be—and is—textually resolved.

Some young second-generation Indian characters resolve this dissonance by assimilating, a strategy most famously supported in relation to South Asian

diasporic literature by Bharati Mukherjee (Lim 303). The process of assimilation was formerly assumed by sociologists to be the predominant strategy through which immigrants adapted to new societies: the ideology of assimilation is implicit within the American "melting pot" philosophy, for example (Rayaprol 131–132). In diasporic Indian children's novels such as *Sumitra's Story* (1982) by Rukshana Smith, which is just outside of the parameters of my sample (1988–2008), and *(un)arranged marriage* (Rai 2001), both British texts, the protagonists reject most aspects of their mother culture and adapt into the dominant culture, self-identifying as British.[2] This is usually symbolised by the protagonist running away from her or his home and family at the narrative's close.

As I have already established, Manny, the protagonist of *(un)arranged marriage*, is raised in Britain and participates in a multicultural society and intercultural friendships. Manny philosophically and morally objects to the racism and commitment to tradition he observes in his diasporic Punjabi Sikh community, for which his father acts as a household representative, performing this version of Indian identity through his bigoted, violent speech and actions. Manny's moral code and behaviour provide him with a sense of identity very different from his family's in that it is more aligned with a liberal value system. Although he seems to consider himself more British than Punjabi, he ultimately views himself as an individual "human being" with certain personal goals:

> I had all these things that I was going to do. I was going to be a top striker for Liverpool and score the winning goals in a league and cup double. I was going to be the first Asian pop star and write a bestseller, go out with supermodels and win an Oscar. (28)

Positive, empowering experiences within his multicultural community allow him to conceptualise himself as a valuable, fully participatory member of British society.

Manny does not understand why anyone might object to a multicultural society, observing, for example, that "[o]ur school was full of mixed-race kids" and "families who had been thrown together. I thought it was brilliant, all that kind of stuff" (47). He acknowledges but rejects his family's racism by continuing to participate in intercultural friendships even though he knows they disapprove: "Maybe he [my dad] could see that I was more influenced by the whole Western culture thing than my brothers had been. He definitely didn't like the fact that my best friend wasn't Asian" (16). His father is also "*hyper*-traditional" about "all this girlfriend/boyfriend stuff," forbidding Manny from participating in any pre-marital romantic relationships, particularly with "the kind of loose women that the Western world tempted you with. White girls. Black girls" (45), and therefore Manny keeps his relationship with Lisa secret. Although Manny attempts to communicate verbally his own value

system to his family, whenever he does so his father physically abuses him in a violent manner. Manny wonders why his parents remain so insistently attached to their traditions and value systems, and why they are so anti-white, when they have chosen to move to the United Kingdom, the place and culture he considers home.

The only threat to Manny's goals, potential, and future possibilities comes from within his own family, due to the way their expectations conflict with his personal goals. When he turns seventeen, Manny's parents expect him to accept the arranged marriage they are planning for him, although he argues that none of his goals "includ[e] getting married at seventeen to some girl who I didn't know" (28). Ultimately, Manny is powerless to stop his parents from pursuing this course, even though they are fully aware of his reluctance. Manny is existentially positioned to have only one choice: on his wedding day he tricks his family and runs away, at which point his Caucasian ex-girlfriend Lisa's parents, a teacher and a lecturer who specialises, significantly, in "a mix of sociology and cultural studies" (53), assist him financially so that he can continue his education, one of his central goals. Because he wants to participate in a multicultural society rather than a monocultural one, Manny believes he has no other choice, ironically, than to "escap[e]" (29), which ultimately means physically and socially removing himself permanently from both his family and his ethnicity of origin.

(un)arranged marriage supports the possibility of bicultural identity and lifestyles but suggests that for some second-generation Indian youth such as Manny, they may be impossible to achieve. Whereas Manny's cousin Eky belongs to a "more liberal" rather than "traditional Punjabi family," in which he is allowed both "to do what he wanted within reason" and encouraged to pursue his education (21–22), Manny's family prevents his autonomy, and thus, assimilation is positioned as a positive alternative for him.

He finds a role model in his older cousin Jag, who escaped traditional family expectations in India, traveled the world, and established a long-term relationship with a Caucasian woman in Australia, and who encourages Manny to "achieve [his] goals" (220). Through interacting with Jag, Manny realises that *only* by escaping his Indian family can he accomplish what he most wants and what is most prized within a liberal value system: finding a true identity, living according to a personal value system, and pursuing an education and profession of individual choice, as Jag has done. The opportunity to learn, expand, and grow is aligned with a liberal value system in this text, embodied particularly powerfully in Jag, an Indian, and Lisa's British parents, who provide the means for Manny to achieve his goals. Although Manny's family alone is not positioned as representative of what it means to be Indian, Manny is forced to shed a sense of himself as Indian, performing his British identity by joining a British family in order to avoid becoming trapped in a pre-determined role. It is significant that he remains in Britain with them rather than, for example, joining Jag in Australia, which underscores the pattern of assimilation.

Manny is extremely satisfied to escape his Indian family, concluding his self-narrated story with the recognition that he will never be "accepted back into the fold" (269) and celebrating his hard-won independence: "my life is mine and that's what I've always wanted. . . . I'm doing it because I choose to do it. And that's what all this stuff has been about" (271–272). Rai positions Manny as forced into a binary conceptualisation of his life, identity, and culture, consequently rejecting his Indian identity, and thus assimilating fully into the dominant culture.

Like Manny, other young second-generation Indian characters in several texts embrace the dominant culture. However, they have no immediate need to escape their cultural identity, as they are victims of neither vicious racism nor intensely focused pressure from any discernible outside source. This pattern is predominant in several texts published in the United States: the protagonists consider themselves more American than Indian, apparently as a result of western media portrayals and ideological messages that convince them their Indian culture is inferior to the dominant culture. They perform this identity by self-identifying verbally as American and by wearing clothing they consider American. However, once they face some crisis that finally convinces them the dominant culture is not superior, they are able to change their points of view and see Indian culture, and thus themselves as Indians, as valuable.

Until that moment, these characters are uncomfortable viewing themselves as both Indian and American. As a result, they adopt a strategy for navigating the Third Culture that Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn calls a "transitional identity." In a discussion of postcolonial women's writing from India, Ghosh-Schellhorn identifies and defines "transitional identity" as "closely connected to the idea of flux, of an ongoing process of transformation from one state to the next" (138) which causes one "to identify with a seemingly superior culture or group of people out of a sense of personal inferiority" (140). The pattern Ghosh-Schellhorn identifies is also applicable to several diasporic Indian children's novels: Dimple in *Born Confused* and Indie in *Indie Girl* (Daswani 2007) provide particularly strong examples of characters that adopt transitional identities in these texts. They conceptualise their bicultural identities in terms of several binary oppositions, the most powerful of which is American versus Indian. It is when characters adopt a transitional identity that they are most vulnerable to perpetuating Orientalist clichés of otherness, an idea I introduced in Chapter 5 and which will be abundantly clear from my discussion of Indie and especially Dimple.

In spite of disapproval from their Indian parents and communities, these characters aspire to be more American than Indian. Familial pressure to adopt an Indian cultural identity is by no means exclusive to American texts: I have already discussed a British example in *(un)arranged marriage*; in *A Group of One*, Tara's grandmother accuses her mother of neglecting to instill a sense of Indian cultural identity in her daughters: "You don't even speak Hindi; you've never

brought the girls to India. How can the girls know anything about their heritage? All they know is Canadian, Canadian, Canadian" (Gilmore 163). Whereas her grandmother laments this apparent cultural omission, it does not disturb Tara.

Similarly, Dimple's parents lament what they perceive as her rejection of herself as Indian. Her mother worries that "I have a J. Lo-dressing, single, alcoholic, *photographer* who has completely lost touch with her Indianness for my only daughter" (Hidier 74), while her father chastises her for straying from her cultural roots, complaining that "[w]e didn't think you'd have to be like them [Americans]" (78). Dimple is clear about her position: she wants to be American, not Indian. However, although she performs her American identity through her clothing, speech, and behaviour, she understands that vocalising this position would be too dramatic for her parents to accept. Instead, she responds silently: "Of *course* I had to be like them. But how was I ever *going* to be like them? . . . I was born different" (78).

Dimple considers herself different from and inferior to her "all-American" peers, seeing herself as "the other one" in "our twosome" because her best friend Gwyn "had it all" (2). Gwyn functions as a synecdoche for superficial American ideals in *Born Confused.* In one of several binaries developed throughout the narrative, Dimple describes Gwyn as "the very image of the American Dream itself, the blonde-rooted, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Marilyn for the skinny generation" and herself as "her reverse twin—the negative to her positive. . . . The Indian nightmare" (11). Dimple's sense of her bicultural identity vacillates: at times she views herself as "not quite Indian, and not quite American . . . more along the lines of Alien" (11), but at others she insists that "I *am* American" (23).

Indie, too, desires to adopt what she perceives as an entirely American identity by becoming a fashion reporter. She rejects her given name Indira, which her father hoped would inspire her to "embody all that he admired about his native land and the other Indira—Indira Gandhi—who once led it. He wanted me to be strong, virtuous, compassionate, intellectual" (Daswani 3–4). Instead, she goes by the name Indie, which connotes the rebellious, independent musicians that refuse to conform to the music industry's prescriptive norms.

Like Dimple, Indie centers her longing for and understanding of the American ideal through one thin, blonde female, in this case Aaralyn Taylor, the founder of Indie's favourite fashion magazine. Indie enters a contest hoping to spend the summer interning for Aaralyn. However, she finds that fitting into the fashion world is a struggle. First of all, she realises that she looks "wrong": whereas Indie believes that "I was American, really. I listened to Beyonce and shopped at Wet Seal and hung out at the mall and spoke with no trace of an Indian accent" (96), she soon realises that "through Aaralyn's eyes"

> I didn't fit the mold, didn't have the kind of physical qualifications that would ever endear me to a woman like her. It didn't matter, I suddenly realised, that I had something of a unique sense of style. I didn't come from

> the right kind of family, didn't have those pretty light-skinned looks and willowy bodies of the girls that are employed by these magazines. (100)

Although she works just as hard at preparing herself to be a fashion reporter as Aaralyn did, Indie finds that "[i]t was like there was a glass wall around Aaralyn Taylor that could only be shattered by people smarter, savvier, prettier than me" (32). Her suspicions are confirmed when she approaches Aaralyn about a summer internship, and Aaralyn perceives Indie not as a potential fashion professional but rather as a potential servant, offering her a babysitting job: "I hear that people from your part of the world are good with domestic duties" (36). Facing this kind of attitude, it is not surprising that Indie would choose to identify with the dominant culture: she wants to see herself as capable of growing professionally due to her individual merits and potential rather than bound by domesticity due to her ethnic background.

Both girls, then, identify with "all-American" role models as ideals of physical and behavioral perfection. They also identify specific people they associate with being Indian and subsequently reject, dramatically perpetuating Orientalist clichés. For Dimple, being American means having it all, like Gwyn. On the other hand, being Indian means being like "Jimmy (Trilok) Singh," the only other Indian in her school: dark, potentially dangerous and smelly. She is repulsed by her Indian classmate:

> [U]nder that turban I knew lay a jungle of unwashed hair, and maybe even a knife. . . . [H]e kind of smelled. It was a smell I'd gotten a whiff of sometimes when we had relatives or Indian friends over—coconut hair oil and cumin and slept-on pillows, sandalwood and sweat. In our house it seemed normal; in the school cafeteria, the odor made me ashamed. (Hidier 59)

To differentiate herself from this repulsive incarnation of her culture, Dimple attempts to disguise herself as a member of the dominant culture by "carr[ying] a tiny pink bottle of Love's Baby Soft in my purse and spritz[ing] it on frequently between classes and under desks" (59).

Indie is not so much repulsed as exasperated by the people around her with whom she associates being Indian. For example, she is as bored by her parents' Indian friends as they are by her commitment to fashion, lamenting that

> all the men clustered around the bar, talking about low-interest rates and high property prices, and all the women [would be] in the living room, discussing Saif Ali Khan's latest film, and whether frozen *parathas* could ever be as good as the freshly made ones. (Daswani 60)

In a more telling description, Indie's feelings of inferiority about not being "Indian enough" are revealed when she complains about the "inkys." Indie rejects them, as she rejects being Indian:

> their straight A's, their skill at *Bharatanatyam* dancing, the fact that they could sing the latest crop of Hindi film songs as well as something from forty years ago. . . . My parents, for all their mostly modern outlook on life, thought that I should be more like the "inkys," closer to "the community" and less involved in what they often described as "American nonsense." (64–65)

However, it is "one of those bossy Indian ladies" who truly rubs Indie the wrong way, because the woman "looked down on girls in the community who expressed any individuality whatsoever—and so never seemed to particularly like me" (147). At every turn, Indie strives to prove to herself and all those around her from both the dominant and Indian cultures that she is nothing like her parents, their friends, the "inkys," or other members of "the community."

Instead, she struggles to perform her American identity, as does Dimple. Paradoxically, however, both girls are deeply troubled by the suspicion that they are not "Indian enough," even while they are preoccupied with proving that they are not and do not want to be Indian. Their flux results partially from their knowledge that neither are they American enough, and this understanding inevitably confronts them in a crisis. It is only after this crisis that Dimple and Indie are able to see the value of their Indian cultural heritage, and themselves as Indian.

The first step towards this appreciation comes not from within, however, but instead when it is legitimised by the dominant culture, in a prototypically colonial manner. For example, when Gwyn pronounces that some Indian fashion accessories Dimple has "dumped" in a drawer are "so cool" (Hider 34–35), Dimple finally sees them as valuable, too, realising "I know this is going to sound crazy, but I wanted them now. *I* wanted to appreciate them" (37). Similarly, Indie is unable to view Indian culture as valuable until she sees

> a double-page spread on Indian-inspired clothing that had been worn by movie and television stars in the last few years: There was television actress Kelli Williams and British actress Helen Mirren both wearing saris at different awards shows and Cate Blanchett in rich gold Indian jewelry at the Oscars. There was a shot of Madonna in her *mehendi* and *bindis*. . . . My heart swelled with pride. Right then, for me, it felt cool to be Indian. (Daswani 168–169)

This proud new acceptance, here conveyed through clothing,[3] marks the characters' first step, however ambivalent, away from a transitional identity and towards understanding themselves as Indian and creating a more balanced bicultural identity.

However, it is not until Dimple and Indie begin to see the fallibility and imperfection of their role-models that they are finally able to break away from their transitional identities. For Dimple, this culminates when she and Gwyn fall out over Karsh, the "suitable" Indian boy with whom her parents have

presented Dimple. Although she initially rejects him, Dimple later decides she is attracted to Karsh and interested in pursuing him romantically. When Gwyn pursues Karsh (unaware of Dimple's new interest), Dimple for the first time begins to question Gwyn's superiority, now positioned as moral rather than physical or social.

Similarly, when Indie begins to recognise Aaralyn's lack of morality, she wonders whether what she thought Aaralyn represented is actually what she wants. The result of this new perspective is that the characters begin to identify more as Indian. For example, Indie comes to associate moral behavior with being Indian, and with herself:

> I recalled my grandfather telling me once on my last trip to India that one of the core teachings in the Hindu scriptures was of a "sincere desire to be of service to others. . . ."
>
> Until today, I had never really understood what he was trying to tell me. . . . It was about being a dutiful person. And I, Indira Konkipuddi, was all about duty. (Daswani 224–225)

Dimple also begins to see herself as more Indian, and this, too, comes from identifying with members of her extended family and their value system. Her cousin Kavita, particularly, provides her with an inspiring role model because her struggles allow Dimple to understand that "if [Kavita] had wondered whether she was Indian enough—she, who had always been to me a sort of epitome of Indian—then who could be? Who could claim the sole right or way to an identity?" (Hidier 383). Dimple decides that this idea is fallacious and feels empowered to create her own unique bicultural identity.

Although initially Dimple and Indie adopt transitional identities in which they identify more strongly with the dominant culture they perceive as superior to the Indian cultures into which they were born, perpetuating Orientalist clichés by seeing Indianness as alien and inferior, both characters ultimately discard this identity in favour of one that draws on elements of both cultures and diffuses binary opposition. These young second-generation Indian characters transform into more self-assured young women who are able to integrate both Indian and American ways of being into their self-concepts. Their growth out of transitional identity is positioned as positive within these texts, as it allows them to resolve personal conflict and find balance. They finally become ready to embrace another kind of identity—one which is celebrated as the ideal in several diasporic Indian children's novels.

Masala Selves: Syncretic Bicultural Identity

Many texts represent an approach to identity that I have designated "syncretic biculturalism" as particularly valuable and healthy. This widespread approach positions protagonists, especially in many young adult novels, as

facing the tensions textually portrayed as troubling by adopting an identity which allows them to cope effectively with cultural conflict, ambiguity, and diversity through blending aspects of Indian and western cultures into a "masala" self. Such a clear resolution is a particularly idealistic way of imagining second-generation Indian experiences, as it proposes a consistently positive outcome. It is also highly political, as it replicates mainstream ideology about the compromises apparently necessary for western multicultural societies to function.

The term "syncretism" has Greek roots denoting "union" and is currently used to describe the heterogenous results of a "reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief" ("Syncretism"). The concept has been appropriated from religious studies by postcolonial critics in relation to culture; it suggests "the fusion of two distinct traditions to produce a new and distinctive whole" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen 229). Whereas supporters of syncretism believe it encourages harmonious interaction and valuable exchange between different cultures, detractors argue that too much of the original cultural tradition is lost or watered down in the process, or that difference is detrimentally overshadowed by sameness. For example, Gauri Viswanathan contends that "the only way both culture and syncretism have been able to deal with difference is by amalgamating difference to a totalizing, homogeneous whole" (15). The use of cultural syncretism in these novels is celebratory and seems to offer a multitude of individually negotiated possibilities for young characters' bicultural identities—all of these, however, act in service of multicultural societal harmony.

Postcolonial critic Monika Fludernik identifies and supports the idea of syncretism in Indian literature, arguing that it demonstrates "a confluence of cultures whose inherently contradictory forces are kept in playful balance" and "emphasise[s] peaceful coexistence" (19). Fludernik advocates syncretic cultural mixing and exchange, as do many adolescent second-generation Indian characters in young adult novels, while their parents often, at least initially, resist in favour of an apparently "pure," imagined Indian identity. Like Fludernik, I have identified a textual preoccupation with syncretism in many works of diasporic Indian children's literature which similarly position cultural blending positively. Young adult novels in particular portray syncretic bicultural identity as a harmonious state that is achieved once characters accept and adopt aspects of both Indian and western culture: these include clothing, language, behaviour, and value-systems. Before young protagonists can feel the benefits of the "playful balance" and experience the "peaceful coexistence" that Fludernik identifies, however, they must first recognise the power of syncretism in their lives and its possibilities for creation within their identities.

By examining several protagonists on their versions of this quest, some parallels are revealed—these are consistent with Shannon's formula of cultural negotiation in multicultural children's literature. In *The-Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, Sunita is exasperated by her conflicting experiences of

being Indian and American. Dimple in *Born Confused* is much more deeply distressed, and Sheila in *The Roller Birds of Rampur* teeters on the verge of a full nervous breakdown because she is so torn apart by internal cultural conflict. Interestingly, all of these identity crises are framed as responses to tensions occurring early in the narratives between the adolescent second-generation Indian female protagonists and their male Caucasian romantic interests. The racialised romances are not the narrative focus, though; they merely function as a springboard to demonstrate how ethnicity and race should be subsumed in service of multicultural harmony.

In addition to romantic relationships, familial relationships played out on a transnational canvas also catalyze protagonists to examine their cultural identities. For example, Sunita's lifestyle changes dramatically when her grandparents arrive from India for an extended visit, and in response her mother forces the family to adopt more traditional Indian roles and behavior. Where she had conceptualised herself as American, Sunita becomes glaringly confronted with a sense of herself as Indian, which makes her confused and uncomfortable. She wonders whether there is "a correct term for someone like Sunita Sen? On the outside, an Indian girl dressed in American clothes. On the inside, total confusion" (Perkins 127). She is sure that Michael, a friend in whom she is interested romantically, will not be able to accept her Indian grandparentsand—the implication is—her. As a result, she begins to distance herself from him while simultaneously examining her bicultural identity. She is so embarrassed by her grandparents that she is willing to estrange herself from Michael:

> Sunita shuddered and made a firm resolution. The All-American Golden Boy [Michael] would not darken the Sens' door until a plane with *them* in it had landed safely back in India. Even if it meant keeping her distance. (52)

Michael finally assures her that neither her family nor her Indian cultural heritage is a source of shame: "'All of those differences make you even more fascinating,' he said softly. 'Especially to me. . . . Who else in our school has a grandfather that looks exactly like Mahatma Gandhi?'" (167). Michael's acceptance buoys Sunita's confidence. As a result, she dramatically alters her attitude towards her culture, her grandparents, herself, and him.

Although Michael's reaction borders on exoticisation and portrays a colonial value system in that the hegemonic group must validate the worth of the parallel culture, it is likely preferable to the devastating racist response Sheila experiences from her Caucasian boyfriend's mother in *The Roller Birds of Rampur*. Michael's attitude towards Sunita's culture and family is positioned as empowering. On the other hand, when after a year of dating Jimmy finally takes Sheila home to meet his parents, his mother's racist reaction to her results in their breakup and propels Sheila into a full-blown identity crisis. Before this confrontation, she had never seen herself "as Indian in any special

sense" (Rana 4). Afterwards, she begins to question her cultural identity, experiencing this as a traumatic undertaking.

Sheila comes to believe that "I was Indian and [Jimmy] was English" and that it is "unusual . . . for an English boy to be going with an Indian girl" (Rana 4), which leads her to question her place in the United Kingdom and her sense of herself as Indian. Her identity crisis is framed as a near nervous breakdown, when Sheila experiences frequent panic attacks: "It was as though some last foundation was being pulled from under me, and I was slip-sliding along without a thing to hold onto" (53). Sunita, too, begins to question her cultural identity, although her identity crisis resembles a "typical" adolescent crisis, characterised more by grumpy moods than anxiety attacks.

These young bicultural characters are frequently bewildered by the task of individually confronting their cultural identities. The personal responsibility of having to cope with integrating two cultures and creating an identity from these elements is overwhelming for them. Sheila literally experiences panic attacks when she hears the word "responsibility," believing that her parents' liberal insistence that she carve her own path through life is a burden. She even envies an Indian village girl whose entire existence and identity is dictated by caste. But Sheila soon recognises that personal choice and the ability to shape her own future are valuable advantages, which is framed as a central, and positive, epiphany in *The Roller Birds of Rampur*. Sheila realises that she does, in fact, want to take responsibility for herself and finally decides she is "lucky" to have "opportunities," feeling grateful for "Mum and Dad letting me try myself out, for letting me fall on my face with Jimmy, to pick myself up and try to make sense of life myself. To be responsible for myself. Find out who I really was" (Rana 200).

For Sheila, re-connecting with her extended family in India, particularly her grandparents, helps her to make sense of what it means to be Indian and British (as well as female). Soon after her identity crisis explodes, she realises that she will "have to go back to India" because in England "nothing made any sense at all" (28). Once there, Sheila participates in many long conversations with her family, exploring ideas about Indian society, religious beliefs, political situations, caste structure, and gender roles. In coming to greater understanding of her mother culture, she comes to a more nuanced understanding of herself and finally recognises the root of her identity crisis: "I had a war going on inside me. I had to be British, or Indian. Either-or-either-or. Why couldn't it be 'and'? I thought suddenly. Why can't I be both British *and* Indian?" (106). Once she realises how this issue is troubling her, she is able to begin to confront it, a strategy she finds empowering: "'I'm both British and Indian,' I said tentatively to myself" (106). Precisely paralleling the formula Shannon recognises at play in multicultural children's literature, Sheila's realisation is shared by Dimple and Sunita, who also eventually recognise that they are not restricted to choosing only one cultural identity.

Like Sheila, Dimple begins to see the possibilities of embracing a syncretic bicultural identity by connecting with a larger Indian community. When her cousin Kavita arrives from India to attend university in New York and introduces her to a vibrant group of diasporic Indian intellectuals, musicians, and artists, Dimple for the first time finds a place she feels might accommodate both of her cultural influences. Dimple feels both at home and disoriented when she looks around and realises that “the minority was the majority here,” but concludes that “this was going to be my scene after all” (Hidier 195). This is Dimple’s first hint that she can be syncretically bicultural by reconciling the American and Indian parts of herself into a cohesive blend rather than attempting to develop her Americanness at the expense of her Indianness.

In other novels, the protagonists’ grandparents, elders who have been traditionally revered and respected in Indian culture, promote a similar value system, providing a strong ideological cue about the value of syncretism. For example, both Sheila’s and Sunita’s grandparents are strong advocates of bicultural syncretism. Indeed, in *The Roller Birds of Rampur*, Sheila’s extended family in India is portrayed as seamlessly blending various aspects of Indian and western lifestyles and philosophies. Sheila realises that her relatives are comfortable with their own syncretic bicultural identities, which is an important revelation for her, as they become models of syncretism. Initially she is annoyed that “none of them seemed to be conscious that so much of them was so British” because she wants to see them as essentially Indian (Rana 61). Whereas her family considers their cultural blending a source of value and strength, Sheila initially finds it threatening, preferring what she conceives of as the security of a village girl’s identity: “Munnia’s life was a series of certainties . . . born to a particular family in a particular village, in a particular caste. . . . Simple” (78). Eventually she rejects this prescriptive course and comes to appreciate cultural syncretism and her own power to create a masala self, an outcome that ironically obfuscates the way such an approach is also prescriptive and acts in service of multicultural harmony in the west.

In *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, Sunita initially resists her family’s support and input in relation to her cultural identity, as she sees herself as separate and different from them. Ironically, while her grandparents’ visit and her mother’s panicked reaction to it precipitate this process, and while Sunita conceives of them as antagonists, it is her grandparents who actually encourage syncretic bicultural identity. She complains to her grandfather that

> Sometimes I wish things in my life were more predictable. . . . But they’re not. I’m like a wild new experiment. Like somebody’s taken a few elements that are Indian and a few that are American and some that are just me, Sunita Sen. And they’ve mixed them all together and are waiting to see what in the world will come out. (Perkins 87)

To her surprise, he responds: "I suppose you children are an experiment, Bontu. But your grandmother and I have been observing the experiment with great satisfaction" (87). Further, when she wishes that she had been raised in India because her life would be "less complicated," he counters that then it would not be as "wonderfully woven together" (88), a position that ideologically supports bicultural syncretism. Even her mother, who has brought about the crisis by trying to re-connect with their Indian heritage so that *her* parents would see her as an obedient, traditional Indian daughter, recognises that "[y]ou need to find your own balance, and I need to find mine" (115). Sunita's mother finally accepts her own parents' acceptance of her and her daughter's syncretic bicultural identities, which is framed as a positive resolution to the narrative.

Whereas Sunita's mother is reasonably quick to recognise that cultural syncretism is a healthier balance for the entire family, Dimple's parents remain resistant, urging their daughter to be more Indian. Her mother worries that "this America—you cannot escape it. . . . It is hard to resist it. But if I'd known the price we'd have to pay for this land of opportunity was our own daughter, I might never have left" (Hidier 83). Partially in response to her parents, partially in response to her cousin and her new Indian boyfriend, and partially in response to her own independent cultural grappling, Dimple comes to be comfortable with her Indian self, blending it into her bicultural view of herself by the end of the novel. She eventually accepts the simple wisdom of her mother, who says: "Dimple, beta. Stop trying to be something you are not" (24). What her mother means is that Dimple is not American and should be more Indian; Dimple decides she can be both.

By the conclusion of *Born Confused*, Dimple is actively implementing Indian concepts into her self-conceptualisation: "[Karsh] smiled and brushed my hair up off my forehead and kissed me there, smack on my third eye, where my bindi would be" (474). For the first time, she is beginning to see herself as harmoniously integrated into Indian as well as American culture, which has positive connotations for her. Indeed, she celebrates her new, hard-won syncretic bicultural identity when she recognises:

> It was no passive homogenous creature, identity, but rather diversity, a thrashing, grinding, and all-out dirty dancing together. It moved and it grooved and it might even sleep with you before marriage. You were the dancer and the dance, and you could shape yourself through a riff, or a shrug, or an on-the-back spin, adapt to new rhythms without losing a sense of harmony with yourself. And harmony, that was no static thing, either, but many different parts coming together to sing the same song. . . . I no longer felt confused—well, a lot less confused. . . . I had the feeling I was home at last. (469)

This extended metaphor provides a clear celebration of Dimple's achievement of a fluid, syncretic bicultural identity. Although it creates an optimistic sense of closure in the narrative, it also allows for future change.

Another vivid example of the recognition and subsequent implementation of syncretic biculturalism occurs at the conclusion of *The Roller Birds of Rampur*, when Sheila finally conceives of herself comfortably as both British and Indian. She has consciously and independently chosen the path she will navigate through the Third Culture and now believes that she can create her own unique identity by recognising that she has been influenced by and is part of both cultures. She ultimately interprets her life in Britain using some of the Indian concepts that her family helped her to understand. I have italicised the Indian concepts here:

> And we were meant to enjoy, to really enjoy all the complexities that life threw at us. All the intricacies and convolutions, everything in this "*lila*", this game, that *Ishwar* began. . . . Being an *IBBRCD* [Indian Born British Raised Confused Desi] is my *karma*, and that I'm beginning to accept it is a little bit of *dharma*.
>
> Living in England is my *karma*, and that it's really okay is a little bit of *dharma*.
>
> Going to Sussex University is my *karma*, and my enjoying it so much is a little more *dharma*. (Rana 260)

The resolution of this novel suggests that it is only by embracing both British and Indian ways of understanding herself and the world that Sheila is able to find her place in it and a stable, healthy sense of self. *The Roller Birds of Rampur* celebrates Sheila's syncretic bicultural identity as a positive resolution to her identity crisis. Her progress from confusion, to pain, to confident blending in her bicultural identity is typical of other adolescent Indian protagonists in diasporic novels for young people.

As I have noted, these texts share a great deal of common ground with many forms of western children's literature, including young adult novels and works of multicultural children's fiction. However, the texts also clearly explore the masala self: the particular subjectivity of individual young second-generation Indian characters as they work out what it means to be bicultural in the west. As the epigraph from one of the rare few mid-twentieth century diasporic children's novels published in the west illustrates and my discussion suggests, the fictional identities of young second-generation Indians seem to be formed differently than they may once have been in reality on the subcontinent. Rather than being predetermined by paternal social positions, or being bound by the strictures of caste and karma, identity is more often actively constructed, although influenced by social conditions. Young diasporic characters struggle to construct their bicultural identities by consciously confronting and struggling with elements of both traditional Indian culture as it is perceived by their family and community, and their own personal perceptions of contemporary western culture.

Consistent with other works of young adult fiction, the protagonists in these texts are portrayed as apparently having a great deal of power in seeming to

create their own unique bicultural identities, yet they are simultaneously shown as caught within the powerful forces of their society's ideologies and institutions. Whereas Maira argues that "[s]hifting from an emphasis on . . . so-called biculturalism to a picture of multilayered identifications" can lead "to a more complex understanding of the ideologies of ethnicity that are available to and reshaped by second-generation youth and of the strategies they use to manage these cultural and political fields," these novels are primarily concerned with demonstrating that by embracing a syncretic bicultural identity that fuses ethnic and national disparity into one harmonious whole, individuals can experience emotional comfort, an outcome that supports a mainstream understanding of how multicultural societies in the west can best function. Young diasporic Indian characters' masala selves are positioned as ideal—stronger, healthier, and more valuable than any alternative. Whereas the resolutions of *Born Confused*, *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, and *The Roller Birds of Rampur* are portrayed as positive in the experience of the protagonists, diasporic Indian children's literature overall generally tends to simplify the idea and development of cultural identity while promoting the idea that other strategies for coping with cultural identity, such as assimilation and transitional identity, are poor substitutes for syncretic bicultural identity.

Only when they find their masala selves are young second-generation Indian characters shown to be, as Dimple says, "home at last." The texts are empowering in their suggestion that young people have the agency to explore and create their own identities, but like other young adult fiction, they ultimately situate adolescents within insurmountable institutional forces that are much more powerful than any individual.

In the novels' insistence on a positive resolution, as well as their imagined strategies of empowerment for child readers, diasporic Indian children's novels focused on identity crises share an overriding tone of aspiration with the majority of contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels in this sample. They also promote a similarly optimistic yet narrow approach to girl characters' construction and performance of Indian girlhood, which is likewise imagined as syncretic, as I discuss next.

Chapter Seven
Performing New Indian Girlhood

> My mother was busy draping the dupatta till it formed a crisscrosss across my body, like a Miss America banner. She stood back to survey her work, clearly pleased.
>
> The two gazed at me now not only approvingly but adoringly. I realised then that my father's comment, coupled with this outfit, had transformed me in their eyes. They weren't seeing the hungover bad girl who felt dressed like a circus attraction; before them was the good Indian daughter . . . demurely previewing her wedding day duds. In other words, they weren't seeing me at all.
>
> (Hidier 82–83)

> At every public celebratory gathering, girls are the objects of much primping and prodding, painstakingly garbed in saris and festooned with paper flowers, while boys are free to wear their baseball caps backward and loose jeans riding low on their hips. . . . The feminist struggle against nationalist spiritual and cultural regulating of women so that they act in conformity with what the patriarchs of the community decree to be the Ideal Indian Woman continues.
>
> (Kafka 6)

Gender and Identity

As the discussion of bicultural identity in the diaspora in Chapter 6 alluded, gender is as significant a factor in identity development as culture. It is gender that is the focus of this chapter, which returns specifically to the presence of the new Indian girl as she is imagined in novels by Indian women writers: in these texts the girl's body is validated as a source of power, and thus she embodies new Indian girlhood.

In every culture the body plays a central role in identity development, as sociologist Meenakshi Thapan explains:

> It is through the lived body in everyday life that a person's sense of identity is constituted. The body has symbolic and cultural value, which may differ across cultures, and is also defined, shaped and constrained by society. . . . However, a person is also an agential body, in communication, and negotiation, with significant others in everyday life. (1–2)

Thapan points to the power of the body and its performative role, as well as its potential as a cultural signifier. All of these functions of the body intersect with the development and communication of gendered identity as it is portrayed in Indian girlhood in the novels in this the sample. The brief epigraph from *Born Confused* provides a clear example of this performative element in Indian girlhood: as long as a girl acts—or even dresses—like a "good" Indian girl, she will be seen as one, thus fulfilling cultural expectations. No wonder, then, that new Indian girls in many of these novels manipulate their bodies and clothing as sources of power. In doing so, they claim agency over the very space that their families may demand act as a larger cultural instrument.[1]

Whereas Chapter 2 discusses the ways that girls vie for gender equality from within the web of their interrelationships, here I shift the focus to the ways they wield their individual bodies in both this pursuit and in carving out their identities. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, in many novels, particularly those by Indian women writers, girlhood is generally imagined as an empowered state. The source of this power is both the girls' bodies *and* their control over those bodies: fictional new Indian girls use their bodies, voices, and clothing to perform individual versions of Indian girlhood as a state of power.

It is important to note here that although my language may connote sexually suggestive overtones, my discussion of the new Indian girl character's body in this chapter refers to an asexual body. In this way, my focus differs from most discussions of South Asian women writers' use of women characters' bodies in their writing for an adult audience. However, as with women's sexual bodies, new Indian girls' bodies are equally prone to restrictive checks which undermine their apparent power, particularly when girls are expected to embody Indian cultural traditions. This pattern affirms Trites's conviction that adolescent characters must learn to function within social constructions of gender and other variables (*Disturbing the Universe* 3), an idea I introduced in Chapter 6. In reality, and particularly in the west, Indian girls (and women) seem to be assigned a particularly heavy burden as the bearers of tradition (Thapan 6 and 9), a role less often assigned to boys (Rayaprol 137). Thus, gender is intricately connected with many sociocultural expectations and variables. As Thapan argues in relation to Indian women's gender identity, "the dividing line between compliance and subversion is thin and the woman's body is often the conflicting site of both giving in to, as well as resisting, dominant constructions," which is why it is essential to "recognise the limited nature of agency even though the possibilities may be endless" (11).

Perhaps as a result of such cultural pressures in the real world, the liberal feminist authors in the sample texts imagine girlhood in a particular way. In a manner similar to the young second-generation Indian characters who perform a syncretic bicultural identity that blends values and behaviours from Indian and western cultures, I contend that many fictional Indian girl characters perform a syncretic girlhood which blends values and behaviours traditionally constituted as either masculine or feminine in the Indian societal context, thus enabling a new, stronger whole—new Indian girlhood. However, there are equally strong checks in place that limit the parameters of this girlhood. In particular, new Indian girls must be physically attractive according to the standards of the mainstream middle class, they must be willing to perform their Indianness by wearing Indian clothing at public Indian social events, and they must channel their power towards upholding hegemonic societal aspirations. Thus, whereas they may appear to have the agency to individually navigate and construct their gender identities, they are actually constrained by cultural expectations.

In effect, this gendered blending of Indian and western, feminine and masculine, positions new Indian girls well to face the public sphere, typically school in childhood and the workplace in adulthood. Many girls and women—particularly those of the urban middle class—are now expected in reality to participate in this sphere both in India and the diaspora. More specifically, gender syncretism enables the imagined new Indian girls to meet the demands of the Indian national Constitution, in that they are better placed to act as equal citizens. Thus, girlhood is reimagined as a powerful state, with many texts featuring aspirational portrayals of powerful, balanced girl characters who make valuable contributions to society. Such girls provide impressive role models for young readers. However, this portrayal is not entirely liberatory, as it also functions to contain girls: the new Indian girl may be yet another socially coercive prescribed role in the service of the current needs of Indian society. Girls' power is legitimised only when it is used to perpetuate contemporary hegemonic norms which, although they are different from traditional norms, remain prescriptive.

Before moving on to the specific ways in which new Indian girl characters use their bodies, voices, and clothing to perform their syncretic girlhoods, it is necessary to explain how I am using the term "syncretic girlhood." Naima, the protagonist of *Rickshaw Girl* (Perkins 2007), provides a clear-cut example of this figure by successfully questioning the gendering of cultural traditions and choosing to accept those elements that support her own value system as a new Indian girl, rejecting those that do not, and adopting some behaviours that would traditionally have been considered masculine. Naima adapts her personal skills in decorative painting, an activity that has been traditionally designated as feminine in her society, into skills that have been part of the masculine realm, fixing rickshaws, so that she can contribute financially to

her family. In Naima's case, as with other new Indian girls, this process leads to great growth and power.

Naima begins the story with a "transitional identity" in relation to gender: she devalues herself because she is a member of the female sex. She desperately wants to contribute financially to her family, but she despairs that she will not find a way to do so, as girls are rarely permitted to work outside the home. When she nonetheless attempts to find paid employment, Naima is surprised to learn that her traditionally feminine skills are valuable. In refusing to be limited by society's understanding of girls, she finds unexpected ways to use her body and her abilities differently. Through this blending of behaviours, Naima embodies a syncretic girlhood, and in doing so she makes valuable contributions to her family and community.

By initially devaluing herself as a girl the way she has been devalued by her society, Naima values masculine contributions to society in the form of working outside the home and earning money. To that end, she attempts to take her father's rickshaw one afternoon while he is asleep. However, she lacks the physical strength to control the machine, and "the rickshaw didn't budge" (30). When her efforts end in disaster and the rickshaw rolls down a hill, Naima solicits her younger sister to help: "The two sisters struggled to pull out the rickshaw, but it was too heavy for them"; Naima finally admits that they must "[g]et Father" to help (33). Their girls' bodies betray them; they simply do not have the strength necessary to cope with the rickshaw. This is only further proof to Naima that as a girl, she is unable to help her family. Because she sees her contributions as falling short, she feels deeply inferior. Now, too, she must cope with her extreme guilt for inadvertently causing damage to the rickshaw, which will impede business and cause even more financial stress for her family. She is determined to make up for what she has done and believes that only by adopting a masculine role and persona will she be able to do so; here the performative element of gender is foregrounded.

Naima's first step is to "put on the boy's clothes, tucking her braid carefully under the cap" (55). Even though she feels "odd" (56) in the clothes, she recognises that they allow her unprecedented freedom and agency in the public realm and begins to feel "confident" (59): "Only a few women and girls her age were out walking. They stood out like marigold blossoms in the grass. Everybody stared at them. Naima strode along in her disguise, enjoying the freedom from curious eyes. *How easy to be a boy*" (57). This new understanding of what it means to be a boy—achieved through wearing boy's clothing—is both surprising and empowering to Naima, and without hesitation, she asks people in the town to direct her to the new rickshaw repair shop, where she hopes to find paid employment.

Although Naima resists the strictures of traditional feminine roles in her society, she has also internalised them. Therefore, she is shocked when she meets the shop's owner and discovers a woman: "Naima's head whirled and her mouth fell open. This widow was the owner of a rickshaw repair shop? . . .

How could that be?” (61). Similarly, the woman, who is bucking convention simply by running the shop (and yet complying with it by wearing the white sari of a widow—surely not the most suitable garment in which to repair rickshaws) also has a rigid conceptualisation of acceptable gender roles. When Naima offers to help in the shop by painting designs on the rickshaws, citing her proficiency in decorative painting, the woman retorts: “Why don’t you go and bother someone else? We both know that boys don’t paint *alpanas*” (61).

Naima can only gain the woman’s empathy and attention by proving she is “not a boy,” which she accomplishes instantly by removing her hat so that “her braid tumble[s] down” (61). The woman looks “amazed,” as amazed as Naima is to meet her, and asks Naima for an explanation. Once she has listened to the girl’s story, she is firmly on Naima’s side, asking, “Who says girls can’t earn money?” (63), and insisting that “[t]hings are changing whether people around here like it or not. These days a woman who wants to start her own business can borrow money from our women’s bank” (64). She gives Naima a job. Later, the woman confirms that Naima’s traditionally female abilities are an asset: “It’s a good thing you turned out to be a girl with plenty of *alpana* experience. I don’t think I’d have given a boy a chance” (76). Naima concludes that “it’s a good thing I turned out to be a girl” (77). Her mother, too, concurs: “Times are certainly changing. . . . It’s a good thing she turned out to be a daughter instead” (78–79).

Rickshaw Girl ultimately validates girls, proclaiming their traditional activities as newly valuable contributions to the national economy. The narrative imagines new Indian girlhood as a powerful state by portraying a syncretic girlhood, which creates a strong case for the fact that qualities and abilities traditionally designated as female *are* valuable to society, particularly in conjunction with qualities that would have been traditionally considered masculine. Thus, femininity and masculinity are both celebrated. Naima uses her body in unexpected ways to help her family: while she may lack a high level of physical strength, she has impressive manual dexterity, fine motor control, and aesthetic sense. She also exhibits gender neutral qualities, such as intelligence and perseverance, when she devises a strategy to navigate her way to the rickshaw shop and completes her tasks successfully. Although she temporarily feels compelled to dress and act like a boy, and although her new job in the public sphere would have been traditionally considered masculine behaviour, Naima quickly learns that she can contribute to her family financially, not to mention to her community, by putting to work skills that are culturally designated as feminine. Further, she benefits financially from this behaviour, which reinforces the value of female contributions to society. Naima refuses to bow to the societal conventions that have traditionally restricted girls’ contributions, and she finds a strategy for resistance. In doing so, she becomes a new Indian girl who embodies syncretic girlhood.

In this portrayal, Perkins refutes many central traditional restrictions on girls’ lives: she gives Naima a voice, a path into public life, the opportunity

to contribute to her family financially, as well as the will and the ability to refuse conventionally narrow gender roles. In doing so, Perkins also retains several crucial aspects of what have been considered feminine ways of being: creating decorations and remaining enmeshed within family and community relationships—Naima is neither forced to run away from home nor to dress and/or act like a boy permanently. She can remain a girl within her own family while simultaneously taking on what are more usually understood as masculine behaviours. *Rickshaw Girl* effectively demonstrates the way disempowered, traditionally female activities play a role in an empowered syncretic girlhood that serves contemporary Indian society.

Transforming Prison to Powerhouse: Imagining the Girl's Body

The vivid suggestion that a girl's body can act like a prison becomes clear in the opening chapters of *Rickshaw Girl* and other texts such as *Keeping Corner* (Sheth 2007), which demonstrates that because Leela is female in body, tradition requires her to act according to the behavioural code prescribed for widows. As a result, she must remain trapped inside her home. Sheth, however, refuses this outcome and re-imagines Leela as a new Indian girl using her voice to protest the situation she has been forced into, her mind to study in preparation for a career, and her body as a source of strength that ultimately liberates her from the domestic sphere so that she can serve society as a teacher. In an entirely different context, Dimple also questions the power of her body in relation to her social roles in *Born Confused*, asking, "Where was home? East or West or my body in between?" (Hidier 249). When Maya returns to Canada after fleeing to India in *Maya Running*, she finally re-inhabits her own "skinny body" (Banerjee, Anjali 203) and comes to understand that it does not matter where she lives, because her home is in her body: "Home is the place that etches itself into you, that becomes part of you" (205). What the new Indian girl ultimately learns in many novels is that her body is truly her home—where it once trapped her, it ultimately liberates her.

This reclamation of the female body as a source of power positions the texts as feminist, in that they ultimately refuse to position girls' bodies as prisons but instead imagine those bodies playing a central role in creating their gendered identity. Such a belief is often implicit in Indian women authors' work for adults: Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and other women writers "seek to establish a woman's right to her body" because "any attempt to seek selfhood or project a subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom, has to work through the body, and deconstruct received notions regarding a 'good' woman" (Jain 119–120). Indian women writers adopt the strategy of "foregrounding the female body" as they attempt to work out the "problems" of "communicating a cultural inheritance, and creating space for construction or recovery of a self" (Jain 139). The new Indian girl also claims a right

to her body as her home: she chooses how to wield it actively as a tool in the cause of her choice and relies on it as a site of knowledge. This imagined state of girlhood deconstructs the notion that a traditional "good" Indian girl must remain physically docile at home simply because her body is female, while insisting that she can utilise her body in new and powerful ways. However, the new Indian girl is also required to be "good" in other ways, as I discuss later in this chapter.

In their children's novels, Indian women writers imagine the new Indian girl's body as a site of knowledge and experience in relation to what it means to be a girl, what it means to be Indian, and any tensions between the two. The body can be both a prison and a powerhouse, a temple and an arena of contention: it is both celebrated and problematised. In the novels published in India, new Indian girl characters often wield their bodies as tools that allow them to meet national aspirations. In the diaspora, several girl characters associate not being feminine enough, which they understand in terms of their own and others' bodies, with not being "Indian enough." When such conflicts are positively resolved, as they often are, characters shift from believing that their bodies prevent inclusion in the dominant culture to making peace with their bodies in the context of Indian culture, as I discuss in relation to *Born Confused* and *Indie Girl* (Daswani 2007) later in this chapter. It is important to note, however, the limitations of this acceptance: no new Indian girl is portrayed as unattractive, obese, or physically disabled in any way. Thus, new Indian girlhood also plays a normalising role.

Even if new Indian girls are temporarily bound by their bodies and experience them as problematic, their bodies can also function as a source of wisdom and are thus shown to provide valuable knowledge that stems from outside a more androcentric rationality. For example, in *The Roller Birds of Rampur* (Rana 1991) Sheila's body acts as an indicator of truth during anxiety attacks. Although she experiences pain which she is initially unable to control, her body is her most valuable source of information about how she fits into the world around her. Once she learns special breathing and physiotherapy exercises, she gains control over her body, thus harnessing its full potential.

Deepa Agarwal illustrates a similar phenomenon clearly in *The Traveller's Ghost* (1994) when the protagonist, Kriti, is unsure about something intellectually until her body provides her with the right answer, allowing her to act successfully. For example, when "Kriti suddenly fe[els] uncertain" and wonders, "Had she panicked for no reason? Was the menace a product of her own mind?" she realises that "the cold, hard ball of fear in her stomach was real" and acts correctly based on this signal from her body (31). When girl characters trust their bodies and listen to the wisdom communicated from them, they have a powerful foundation from which to act. For instance, Sheila works on understanding what her panic attacks are trying to tell her. This leads her to India, where she eventually integrates her bicultural identity. For Kriti, listening to her body allows her to solve the central mystery in *The Traveller's*

Ghost, both leading to a sense of empowerment and protecting others in her community. Although such experiences of the body may initially feel uncomfortable to girl characters in these novels, and may seem to trap them temporarily within the pain of their bodies, overall the new Indian girl's body acts as a site of freedom and power in the literature.[2]

In the novels published in India, the portrayal of the new Indian girl's body tends to be straightforward and unproblemetised: girls often participate as one of the team and they physically contribute to solving problems, all of which uphold national aspirations. For example, in the fantasy *The Buggles* (Ganguli 2001), protagonist Anjali becomes part of the Buggle community and joins a small group of magical Buggles, helping them to defeat their enemies, the Boils. Her actions are typical of syncretic new Indian girlhood: Anjali draws on traditionally feminine ways of being by cooperating with the Buggles. At the same time, she draws on more masculine behaviours by leaving home, participating physically in a demanding journey, and devising a physical strategy to destroy the Boils. Although terrified, Anjali initially confronts a Boil during their attack and stomps her "foot down on top of it," which has the desired effect: "The Boil had disappeared. I looked down at my feet. . . . I had killed the Boil. I had done it" (365). Anjali continues to fight the Boils, enlisting the Buggles in her struggle and teaching them how to destroy their enemy. This is an empowering portrayal of Anjali, showing not only her intellect, in that she devises a strategy by which to defeat the Boils, but also her physical strength, in that she deploys the strategy successfully through her body.

Anjali functions as an effective representative for the many other girls who act alongside their male and female friends and relatives to solve crime and mysteries in a wide variety of the novels published in India. They inhabit the public space of the community rather than remaining inactive and confined to the domestic sphere and its limited activities. These girls have the freedom to run, to climb, to sneak around, and the physical strength necessary to carry out these tasks.

It would be misleading to imply that such an empowered portrayal of girls' physicality in the children's novels published in India is the exclusive domain of women writers. Although most examples are located in the sphere of women's writing, a small number of male authors participate in imagining girls as empowered in the same way, especially Ranjit Lal. For example, in *Bossman and the Kala Shaitan* (2005), Lal develops the physically strong character of Shalu, a girl who studies martial arts. Because of her physical training, she is able to protect herself and to defeat the villain. Although described as a "sweet, gentle softie," Shalu puts "her karate lessons to good use at last" when she "delivers two hard blows . . . in the ribs and solar plexus," and "another at the back of the neck" to disarm the villain, who is enraged to be "felled by a mere slip of a girl" (Lal 186–187). However, Lal's portrayal is not an unmitigated celebration of girls' physical strength: there are still many reminders

that even if girls are not weak, they are seen to be so, and that being sweet and gentle is equally important as being strong and physically capable.

Lal counters his own tempering of girls' physical abilities in his later historical novel *The Battle for No. 19* (2007), which I have already discussed for its exceptional emphasis on cooperation. As well, though, the girls act with impressive, unchecked physical strength and precision. Although the adult male villains in the text consider the girls unworthy adversaries and the narrator wonders, "[W]hat chance did eight schoolgirls from the hills on a sightseeing trip have against fifteen sadistic men?" (Lal 148), the girls are shown to possess the physical strength, dexterity, and bravery to defeat the men. This strength is emphasised in a conclusion unusual for a children's novel published in India. When the adults—all men—finally arrive to capture the criminals, the girls do not completely forfeit their agency. Instead Puja, the protagonist, is invited to utilise her excellent archery skills to act as a sharpshooter. Her success earns her the praise of her distant father: "no damn son could have shot like that" (178), demonstrating that Puja's syncretic girlhood positions her as superior to a boy.

The Battle for No. 19 concludes with the strong message that girls are not simply as good as boys, they are better. They can match boys by devising and executing strategy intellectually and by wielding strength and dexterity physically, but better still, they eschew violence and vengeance in favour of community and cooperation. Thus, new Indian girlhood is imagined as serving Indian society in an ideal manner, positioning girls as extremely valuable members of the nation.

In the novels published outside of India, the body is less a point of interest or concern for what it is capable of doing physically, but more for what it signifies culturally. Rather than being celebrated as a source of activity and strength, the body is often questioned by several young second-generation female characters in the diasporic young adult texts. This questioning is related to bicultural tensions, but also to the fact that there are more adolescent girls portrayed in these texts. In reality, adolescent girls generally tend to have a more fraught awareness of their physical bodies than do younger children. For the diasporic girl characters, the body is not primarily a site of physical power, but instead a place where emotional reactions to bicultural identity are focused. Often, girl protagonists agonise over the size and shape of their bodies, feeling that they are too large to fit the western ideal perpetuated by the media and popular culture. Indeed, their bodies often directly hinder their ability to embrace a syncretic bicultural identity, and, in fact, it is only when they become more accepting of their bodies—as new Indian girls—that they are able to create this ideal identity.

This angst stands in direct contrast to much more accepting attitudes in the novels from India, in which girl characters never agonise over body size. Indeed, in one series a larger body shape is even celebrated: in Shashi Deshpande's trilogy of adventure-mysteries (2006), Minu is consistently portrayed

as a well-adjusted, calm yet active, intelligent girl who enjoys eating. Whereas others tease Minu about her appetite and plumpness, she herself exhibits no anxiety whatsoever about her body, instead seeing it as acceptable:

> "If Minu gets food like this every day, she'll fit only in a truck." They all roared.
>
> But Minu did not seem to mind. She was eating away placidly. "Nothing wrong with being fat. Look at me. Look at Roopa. I'd be ashamed to be skinny like these fellows. Look at Polly's legs. Like a chicken's." (*The Hidden Treasure* 111)

Minu's acceptance of her body, as well as her ability to wield it successfully in improving her community by fighting crime, is regularly reiterated throughout Deshpande's narratives. Her attitude is similar to Dimple Lala's cousin Kavita's. Recently arrived from India, Kavita feels positive about the size of her body. When her uncle, Dimple's father, observes "You *have* put on a lot of weight" and nods "approvingly," Kavita laughs and pats "her belly" which is "straining" the fabric of her shirt (Hidier 87). Whereas Dimple is horrified by her father's announcement, she is "even more stunned" when Kavita replies "'Thank you, ji' . . . merrily" (87). In direct contrast, Dimple's understanding of her own body as a site of inferiority torments her, and she is amazed by Kavita's acceptance.

Whereas no other characters in *Born Confused* refer to Dimple's weight or body as problematic in any way, Dimple believes that she is unacceptably overweight, designating herself "harpoonable" because she has difficulty fitting into the latest trendy clothes (22). Dimple complains, "[a]ll these hips, boobs, butts. Why can't I just be normal?" (23). Her mother's response is to try to convince Dimple that "[y]our body is your temple; your body is your home. It tells you where you are from" (23). Dimple does not initially see her body as her home, but she does by the narrative's conclusion, when she finally observes that "I actually felt like I fit in my clothing for the first time" (451).

But Dimple is able to accept her physical shape only with Kavita's help. Kavita shows her how to situate her female body within her Indian cultural heritage, which allows Dimple to begin to reconcile her Indian and American selves and begin to value Indian culture. Kavita takes her to an art gallery and shows Dimple a statue of an Indian temple deity. Dimple's reaction to the statue is positive: even while she observes that "[h]er thighs were definitely the kind that stuck together and her belly rounded out voluptuous," she recognises that "it didn't matter" because the statue "breathed grace" (412). Dimple feels "so complete just looking at her" and then realises that she "was not feeling too short, chubby, geeky" (412). When Kavita tells Dimple that the statue "looks just like" her, Dimple feels "stunned" and happy, and she accepts the compliment (413). This is a cardinal point in *Born Confused*, after which

Dimple feels far more content with herself, her body, and her culture. She acts with greater agency and takes responsibility for her own happiness once she is confident in her body and feels that it is her home.

In addition to shape, size, and weight, girls understand their bodies as Indian by skin colour. In the Indian novels, there is relatively little emphasis on skin colour, although occasionally fairness or darkness comes into play in relation to caste, as in the case of *The Chandipur Jewels* (Sinha 2004). This is an interesting omission, as it is commonly understood that fair skin colour is associated with both beauty and high caste in India. In fact, in *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet* (Sheth 2007) this colour hierarchy is one target of Jeeta's chief criticisms of traditional Indian values.

In the diaspora, girl protagonists frequently scoff at this colour hierarchy in its Indian context. Nevertheless, they are aware that it is their skin colour which marks them as "other" in their western communities. For example, Dimple remembers an occasion from early childhood in which a boy "told me I was the color of dog doo" (102), and although she never expresses displeasure with her skin colour, she is strangley thrilled by a new piece of fake identification, which shows an "older, wiser . . . white-armed Dimple" who has the potential to be "all I couldn't" (9). In this context it is difficult to discern what Dimple sees as the source of power: the white arms or the actual ID card itself. But while skin colour is not something Dimple targets as problematic, other characters do become disenchanted with their skin colour due to its links to racism both in India and the west. In *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* (Perkins 2005), Sunita suddenly becomes aware of her brown skin colour and starts to feel dissatisfied with it:

> Sometimes Sunita loved the rich darkness of her skin—the color of caramel in the winter, the color of copper in the summer, the color everyone else coveted enough to bake for hours in the sun. But lately, she was aware of her skin in a new way. It didn't seem bronze or copper. It just seemed dark. Too dark. (40–41)

With their focus on the new Indian girl's body as a site of power, Indian women writers celebrate girls' physical strength and freedom. However, when the focus shifts to the body as a site upon which to play out cultural identity, some new Indian girls feel less confident in their bodies, particularly in the diaspora. And when skin colour is demonstrated to be frequently at the root of racial discrimination, girls' bodies anchor them to Indianness. Whereas initially they may resent the way their bodies preclude their inclusion in the dominant culture, diasporic new Indian girls come to accept and value their own Indianness as well as their bodies, ultimately feeling at home. They explore the differing ways in which discrimination can be focused through skin colour and ultimately reject these beliefs, even while they are aware of their presence in their communities.

Whereas some explorations of the relationship between the new Indian girl and her body are celebratory and emphasise empowerment, blending behaviours that have been traditionally designated masculine or feminine into a syncretic new Indian girlhood, Indian women writers also demonstrate the restrictions on girls' power. No matter how much physical freedom and strength girls are shown to have, there are checks at work. For example, in children's novels published in India, girl characters are often told by their male peers to stay home during activitities deemed unsuitable for girls. The girls usually ignore such advice and participate regardless, offering unique and invaluable information, cooperation, and physical contributions to help solve the problem at hand and enhance their communities, thus fulfilling national aspirations as equally valuable citizens.

Their eagerness to participate, however, is sometimes punished with reminders that they are physically weaker than their brothers. For example, in *The Chandipur Jewels* (Sinha 2004), Sarika insists upon participating in the mission to re-claim the family's ancestral treasure, countering her older brother's insistence that "girls don't go on dangerous missions" by claiming that "girls can do anything boys can and much better too" (39). However, it is ultimately Sarika's weakness which jeopardises the siblings' attempt to solve the mystery when "she did not see the stone jutting out in front of her. She tripped and fell. . . . Sarika tried to stand up. Praveen pulled her along as she limped painfully. It was too late" (43). Apparently Sarika was incorrect: girls cannot do things better than boys can. Sarika is portrayed as the weaker child here, because she is incompetent enough to allow a stone to hurt her, and then sensitive enough to allow it to slow her progress. On the other hand, Praveen is strong enough to help her. The question that begs to be asked is: why wasn't it Praveen who stepped on the stone and Sarika who helped him? Whereas Indian authors go to great lengths to portray physically strong and active girls, and the portrayal of Munia in *The Chandipur Jewels* is exceptional in this, there are still subtle indications of a more traditional view of the female body as an entity that is weak and requires protection or aid.

On a much more dramatic scale, the frequently explored theme of arranged marriage highlights one prominent way in which a girl's body can position her as disempowered and a pawn in the workings of a patriarchal society, linking her to a cultural role as bearer of tradition.[3] Munia, a young adolescent low-caste servant, for example, runs away to escape an arranged marriage in *Vanishing Trick at Chandipur* (2004). As a result, Sarika's family houses and educates Munia for a short time, but the girl is eventually persuaded to join her husband. However, Munia is unhappy in marriage and runs away again in *S.O.S. from Munia* (2004), the final work in Sinha's Chandipur trilogy. Munia is kipnapped, but because she has learned to read and write, she scribbles a note pleading for Sarika and her family to rescue her, emphasising her weakness. Once again the family rescues Munia, whose agency as a strong, active

girl in *The Chandipur Jewels* has evaporated. Instead, her status as a Third World girl is re-emphasised, as are the ways this status renders her powerless.

In addition to Munia's plight, I have already explored girl characters' reactions to arranged marriages in my discussions of *Sita and the Forest Bandits* and will do so in relation to *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet*. The fact that this theme is so prevalent in Indian women writers' children's novels indicates that whereas the new Indian girl's body is a site of power that can be used to resist tradition in order to carve out an individual identity, it remains vulnerable to traditional cultural expectations as well. The very possibility of arranged marriage acts as a cultural check on the new Indian girl's physical strength and freedom as performed through her body, rendering her potentially trapped and powerless.

The New Indian Girl's Voice

New Indian girls use their bodies as sites to perform physically their syncretic girlhoods, but they also use their voices: the two are sometimes intricately connected, as in the case of Leela who verbally protests against her physical imprisonment in *Keeping Corner*, eventually convincing her mother that "Leela needs to study" (Sheth 238), her father that "[Leela] made me realize that this is not just about [her], it is also about something bigger" (246–247), and finally gaining their support to become a teacher. In doing so, Leela and other new Indian girl characters create a ripple effect that ultimately expands the boundaries of girlhood. Whereas in patriarchal societies females have long been the silenced sex due to their historical lack of access to legitimate public channels through which to voice concerns and values, these children's novels grant voice to girl characters, even if only at the individual level. Thus, new Indian girls use their minds critically to question, accept, and reject cultural traditions while using their bodies as sites of knowledge and power, and their voices as vehicles of communication, creating a complex performance of the identity of syncretic girlhood. When used to protest traditional restrictions on girls' participation in and contribution to society, voice allows the expansion of girls' social roles.

A strong example of this powerful use of voice comes from Jeeta in *Koyal Dark, Mango Sweet.* Jeeta's primary site of resistance to tradition is her voice, and she performs as a new Indian girl when she vocally refuses what she perceives as societal injustice towards girls and women. She often directs this resistance towards those who seek to reinforce the traditional views that Jeeta believes problematic, as when her "Kirti Auntie" frequently insults Jeeta's dark skin, calling it "*bhine-vaan*" or "wet complexion"; Jeeta finally retaliates that being dark-skinned is "not as bad as *bhine-saan*, soggy sensibility" with the result that "she stopped calling me *bhine-vaan*" (Sheth 37). At turning points

such as this one, Jeeta's voice garners power and change in her own life and thus she embodies new Indian girlhood.

Whereas some of her peers admire Jeeta's critical outspokenness, her sisters and mother consider it a serious problem. For example, her mother complains that "every day, Jeeta's tongue wags more and more, and I don't know what to do with her" (42), and frequently admonishes Jeeta to remain silent, keeping her thoughts to herself: "Learn to be polite and don't argue with your elders" (43). She threatens twice to "pull [Jeeta's] tongue out" (43 and 200) unless Jeeta controls it. Jeeta's verbal resistance, even when it is contained within her own home, is considered both powerful and dangerous. Jeeta is harshly critical of what she considers outdated norms in her family and society, particularly arranged marriages and the privileged position of males, but her sister Mohini acts as a mediator and attempts to convince her that tradition has its merits. She points out to Jeeta that "you think Mummy lives in the last century, but you have to put yourself in her place. . . . All Mummy wants is for all of us to be happy," defending their mother's role as the keeper of tradition: "Pappa works hard for us, but Mummy molds us . . . so we can live in this society" (103). Jeeta, however, insists verbally that she does not "want to be molded" (103) and goes on to negotiate verbally with her parents until she convinces them to support her further education and delay her arranged marriage, stretching the boundaries of her girlhood in ways that her quiet, passive older sisters were unable or unwilling to do.

In the diaspora, girl characters frequently compare Indian cultural traditions with the social norms of the western countries in which they live, often rejecting Indian behavioural expectations in favour of the perceived freedom and individuality of western options. Many girl characters are portrayed as independently evaluating sociocultural expectations and ultimately deciding upon their own courses of action; however, they must also negotiate permission from their parents in order to follow this course, and in these negotiations their voices provide the strength they need to secure the desired outcome. Whereas predictable resistance to stereotyped Indian cultural expectations, such as outstanding academic achievement and the eventual pursuit of what Indie calls "a 'noble profession'—something in medicine or engineering or government" (Daswani 4), as well as to traditional arranged marriages, is commonplace in the diasporic novels, there are also much more subtle explorations of sociocultural expectations. For example, Sunita is baffled by her parents' resistance to her request to sleep over at her best friend's home, which occurs during a point in *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen* when she is becoming exasperated with their behavioral expectations since her grandparents' arrival. Whereas Sunita has accepted many of their rules, she takes issue with their latest refusal to let her attend the sleepover, and she uses her voice as the instrument of her agency:

> "You've only let me spend the night at Liz's house three times in my entire life," she told her father. "And that was only because you and Mom were out of town. When I think of all the slumber parties I've had to miss! The other girls think we're the weirdest family in the whole world." (Perkins 31)

Because her father does not explain his resistance, Sunita does not understand its traditional source until her grandmother contributes to the debate by explaining it would "brin[g] shame to the whole family" (32).

Once Sunita understands this sociocultural nuance, she rejects its doctrine completely. She is determined to proceed in precisely the mode of conduct she desires, and she knows just how to convince her father:

> "We're not in India anymore, Dad. And the Graysons are just like relatives, aren't they?" she asked softly. "You know you're always saying that Liz is more like an Indian girl than an American girl." (32)

By verbally reminding her father of Liz's obedient behaviour and academic achievement, Sunita is victorious. She attends the sleepover. Whereas Sunita submits to some strictures on her behaviour as decreed by traditional Indian social conventions, she, rather than her parents, chooses where to limit her acceptance.

When she reaches her final limit of frustration with their expectations, she again uses her voice to protest, this time in an extremely assertive manner, thus catalysing the narrative's resolution. She first wonders if she has "any control over her own life" and then "decide[s] that she too was through with diplomacy. 'I, for one, am not going to that Indian thing this year,' she announced. Everybody stared at her. Sunita had even surprised herself" (113). When her family gently reasons with her, using their nicknames for her and attempting sweetly to coerce her into the behaviour they desire, she finally "shout[s]" at her mother: "My name is not BONTU! . . . It is SUNITA. . . . If YOU want to be elected Indian woman of the year or something, just go right ahead, but LEAVE ME OUT OF IT!" (114–115). In the end, Sunita's voice enables her to embody the syncretic girlhood and bicultural identity she understands to be hers. By refusing to stay silent, she performs her gendered identity.

Notably, however, in this, as in many other portrayals of similar struggles in the diasporic novels, Sunita does not defy her parents outright but rather negotiates with them until she converts their way of thinking to hers. Usually only rigidly traditional characters such as Manny's father and others in the works of Bali Rai are shown to be beyond negotiation and subsequent agreement. In eliciting both improved familial harmony and the outcomes desired by new Indian girls, their voices are portrayed as powerful vehicles through which to embody syncretic girlhoods. Put simply, only by speaking can they be heard, and when they speak, they usually *are* heard. This aspirational view of the power of girls' voices provides a model for actual girl readers of all

backgrounds, although in reality the female voice may not be as powerful as it seems in these texts.

The New Indian Girl's Clothing as a Signifier of Identity

After Sunita's outburst in the turning point of *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, her family resorts to bribery in an attempt to persuade her to attend "that Indian thing": her grandmother cajoles, "I brought a beautiful new saree from India to wear. . . . And gorgeous jewels and gold bangles. Everybody will admire you" (Perkins 113). Sunita, however, instantly rejects this offer, assuring them that "I will never wear one of those long sheets in public" (114) because she believes that wearing a sari would perform her identity differently from how she conceives of herself. Sunita is not alone in her conviction: as my discussion in Chapter 6 indicated but did not examine, a significant proportion of girl characters in the diasporic novels use their clothing to perform their bicultural and gendered identities, a point which now requires sustained attention.

As Alison Lurie notes in a theoretical examination of fashion, clothing can function as a kind of language through which to communicate (3). Lurie adopts the position of most scholars discussing the role of fashion in society: "We put on clothing for some of the same reasons that we speak: to make living and working easier and more comfortable, to proclaim (or disguise) our identities" (27). This is also the way that Indian women writers textually delineate clothing's power to signify new Indian girls' identities in many diasporic children's novels. As Dimple's behaviour attests and as Gwyn actually vocalises in *Born Confused*, "[C]lothes are a huge part of my identity" (Hidier 281). These women writers indicate that the manipulation of clothing in the performance of gender identity is as important as girl characters' use of their bodies and voices, but it functions in more unexpected and seemingly less profound ways.

Perhaps this is because attention to clothing is often stereotyped as a frivolous feminine concern. However, diasporic Indian women writers position clothing as a powerful, rather than superficial, tool for girls to wield by drawing attention to its power in granting agency to girl characters, as well as its cultural role in signifying Indianness and femininity. Similarly, women anthropologists have argued in relation to Indian clothing that whereas male anthropologists once considered "the 'functions' of clothes as markers of social identity in India . . . so obvious and so natural as to obviate the need for discussing them" because "[c]lothes were considered a 'feminine' issue, and little to do with serious academic pursuit," in actuality, the role of apparel as a gendered cultural signifier is crucial, which, accordingly, is the way female professionals now approach the subject (Tarlo 4). In a similar way, Indian women writers of children's novels consistently demonstrate the power of

clothing not simply to influence but to *create* identity, a possibility made clear in the epigraph from *Born Confused*. Like the body itself, its coverings can be restricting or liberating—or something in between. This avenue is almost entirely unexplored by the male writers in this sample, whereas women writers draw attention to the power of fashion, its influence on girl characters, and how those characters can manipulate it to their own ends. However, there are clear limits to this experimentation and manipulation of clothing: girls must remain attractive and feminine, and thus the potential power of syncretic girlhood is restricted.

The focus on clothing is most evident in the diaspora. Interestingly, psychologist Debjani Mukherjee discusses the role of fashion as one of several ways in which young South Asian women in the United States actively shape their bicultural identities in a well-adjusted manner. She cites a study "on identity among Hindu adolescent youth in the United States" which claims that by blending Indian and western fashion, these young people are liberated from choosing one cultural identity at the expense of the other and can instead practice "creative appropriation" and "recombination" which "allow South Asian American women to be active participants in creating and transforming culture instead of confused, conflicted people" (287). As I have demonstrated in relation to young second-generation Indian characters' creation of syncretic bicultural identities, this is very much the portrayal of Indian girls that Indian women writers promote (regardless of country of publication). As my discussion in Chapter 6 alluded and Mukherjee notes, clothing plays a central role in this active creation.

New Indian girl characters in diasporic texts utilise clothing in a multitude of powerful ways: as cultural signifiers, as an arena in which to work out tradition versus modernity, and as a language through which to communicate their gendered identities. In this way, Indian women writers validate the power of clothing, a traditionally feminine concern, as well as the unexpected ways in which girl characters manipulate it to perform their syncretic girlhood. Clothing is typically an individual concern and usually centres around identity development;[4] however, clothing can also be manipulated as new Indian girls question traditional feminine cultural expectations. Signficantly, clothing can equally be used to restrict girls' agency by containing them in traditional gendered roles. The sari is a particularly powerful signifier in this context.

New Indian girl characters manipulate their clothing so that it both reflects their self-conceptualisation and projects to the world the identity they wish to foreground. In this undertaking, western and Indian clothing is often combined to signify syncretic bicultural girlhood (boy characters do not perform their identities in this manner). However, some characters resist this mixing and prefer to use clothing to emphasise their dominant cultural identity; as Lurie notes, "The more significant any social role is for an individual, the more likely he or she is to dress for it. When two roles conflict, the costume will either reflect the more important one or it will combine them" (16). In *The*

Roller Birds of Rampur, Sheila, her best friend, and her sister occupy varying positions on this spectrum. Sheila recognises the power of girls' clothing to connote affiliation with a cultural group and its values. She observes that she herself wears "dresses and tights and jeans" like her British Caucasian friends because she is "like" them: "The way you dress tells you a lot about what your head's like inside" (Rana 12). On the other hand, Sheila's best friend is much more traditional, and Sheila sees a connection between the fact that "Sunny always wore Indian clothes, even at school" and the fact that the girl's "parents wouldn't allow her anything else," because the fact "that she did what they wanted, said everything about her" (12). Sheila's observations about clothing are important at this early stage in the narrative, because she still feels primarily British in her identity. She becomes psychologically disoriented when others see her as primarily Indian, even though her understanding of herself, both "in her head" and through her body and its coverings, is British.

Sheila's younger sister also identifies primarily as British, but Rachna's fashion sense connotes rebellion and is considered problematic by their parents because it departs dangerously from easily recognisable signification of *both* Indianness and femininity. Whereas they accept Sheila's conservative, mainstream western clothing, perhaps because it is feminine and attractive, Rachna "stuns" her family by wearing radical clothing: "a cut-off black T-shirt, a short red skirt, black leggings and Doc Martens boots. Huge oxidized silver earrings . . . silver and plastic bangles . . . at least seven rings on her fingers" (18). Rachna has apparently gone too far, and her parents are angry and disappointed. Nevertheless, although they ask her to change her look, they do not force her to, and eventually they accept her fashion decisions, thereby allowing her to control the expression of her identity.

Other characters in this sample also express their cultural identities freely with parental support. For example, Sunita's older sister Geetie blends several styles: "Her typical outfit was a Peruvian alpaca sweater over jeans. Two or three Indian scarves draped around her neck. African earrings. And Mexican huaraches" (Perkins, *The Not-So* 7). Sunita herself, though, wears "American" clothes on a day-to-day basis, but before the narrative's outset she had not carefully considered how her American and Indian selves intersect. When she begins to do so, she recognises the central role of her clothing in her gendered identity: "On the outside, an Indian girl dressed in American clothes. On the inside, total confusion" (127).

As I established in Chapter 6, by the narrative's resolution Sunita has created a syncretic bicultural identity and feels much more positive about herself, her culture, her family, and her place within her peer group. The novel's final scene demonstrates the transformative power of clothing: whereas earlier Sunita had both rejected the possibility of wearing a sari and daydreamed about receiving the Pulitzer or Nobel Prize "wearing a glittery, low-cut evening gown" (110), she is finally able to demonstrate her comfort with her Indian cultural heritage by wearing a sari. As well as signifying Indian culture,

saris are also often a clear signal that a girl has entered womanhood. Thus the implication here is that Sunita's identity resolution is a sign of maturity, and this is gendered through clothing, particularly at the moment she observes that "[t]he saree definitely made her look older" (175).

Some diasporic girl characters consciously manipulate their clothing as a means to honour their cultural heritage while simultaneously responding to current social conventions. With her professional interest in style, Indie in *Indie Girl* provides the best example of this fashion syncretism. In a variety of public social events, Indie expresses herself and simultaneously exposes her bicultural female identity by fusing differing elements of her wardrobe, such as deciding "to team a long silk *salwar* top with a pair of faded jeans, or my *churidar* pants with a soft layered T-shirt" (Daswani 61).

But whereas her friends admire Indie's "fashion sense" (13), her mother believes Indie is being "disrespectful" by "diluting the beauty of our native garb and, consequently, the purity of our culture" (61). As a woman in a position of domestic authority, Indie's mother is a bearer of tradition and is responsible for both passing along Indian culture and training Indie to do the same. In this context, clothing becomes a complex political canvas, deeply inflected by culture and gender. In a similar real-life experience, postcolonial critic Sangeeta Ray describes a 1996 social event she attended at the residence of the Indian ambassador to the United States. She reports that he praised the women in attendance for their traditional Indian dress of saris and salwar kameez, naming them "daughters of India" (1). Ray contends that there is a lesson to be learned from the ambassador's response:

> Even if men had to adapt because they were part of the ephemeral public life, women could always be counted on to affirm the continuity of tradition. Thus, if Indian women continue to wear Indian clothes while living in the United States, then the fear of "tradition" and "culture" being contaminated . . . was minimal. (1–2)

Ray points out that the ambassador "allowed men to function as citizens of the world," whereas "Indian women were part of the ambassador's global vision *only* as uncontaminated purveyors of an inherent national culture" (2). Clothing is the central signifier in this purveyance; as Tarlo notes, in India "social, religious and regional stratifications are still strongly expressed. . . . [A] change of clothes is likely to be interpreted as an act of desertion or a change of affiliation" (17). Indie's mother promotes this view with her concern that by combining western and Indian clothes Indie will taint the culture's imagined purity. Girls and women are thus forced to employ clothing to fulfil cultural expectations, and in such a context the liberatory quality by which clothing seems to allow girls to create and perform their identities is negated.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, Indie's mother resists any thinning of Indian culture's impact, regardless of the fact that she herself, for reasons

of pragmatism, elected to lay aside her "simple cotton saris" when she first arrived in the United States:

> She couldn't possibly be an effective mother if she was constantly worrying about six yards of fabric on her body. So she had packed up all the saris gifted to her by her parents as part of her trousseau, stashed them in the attic, and had gone to Kmart to stock up on classic-cut jeans and oversized T-shirts, which had remained her signature look ever since. (Daswani 69)

However, when she participates in cultural rituals and celebrations with other Indians, Indie's mother always wears formal, traditional, "undiluted" Indian clothing, urging Indie to do the same. Despite Indie's commitment to performing her own version of her girlhood and her syncretic bicultural identity, she occasionally bows to such cultural pressure, recognising certain events at which it is appropriate—even mandatory—to wear Indian clothing. She is particularly aware of cultural expectations surrounding ritual: "it was going to be in a temple—which meant that as much as I wanted to, I couldn't really jazz up any of my outfits like I usually did" (139). Indeed, when Indie chooses to wear an "undiluted" traditional Indian outfit to a wedding, her entire family is thrilled: instead of receiving the usual "up-and-down staring and a 'what are you wearing?' look" and "exasperation" from her parents, she is praised:

> My mother actually gasped. . . . Even Dinesh, who never really noticed me at all, said, "Hey, Indie, you look nice." . . ."Now *this* is more like it," my father said, walking around me as if I were a piece of art that he was considering buying. (139)

Her family recognises and rewards Indie's gendered performance of their culture. Her father's scrutiny provides a reminder that whereas Indie is a beloved child in her family, she is also a representative of her culture and a means with which to propel it into the future. Only when she fully capitulates to her family's demands do they fully accept and appreciate her, indicating that clothing is not as liberating for Indie as she may hope.

I have primarily been discussing the power and the fraught role of clothing as a cultural signifier, but it is clear that clothing is inseparable from its role as a gender signifier, as the epigraphs and Ray's experience all vividly confirm. Indeed, although clothing is positioned as liberatory in many diasporic texts, its literal and figurative restrictive functions in relation to girls, particularly as they approach womanhood, are also exposed. This is clear, for instance, when Dimple inadvertently stumbles on the ways that traditional Indian clothing can essentialise women into certain perceived roles that may not relate to their identities when she expresses her confusion over Kavita's lesbianism: "you wear kajal, you have long hair. And you're always in salvars and chaniya

cholis. You're so feminine. You're so *Indian*" (Hidier 414). Kavita insists that "[b]eing with a woman doesn't make me less Indian!" (414), but her response can be stretched to demonstrate that clothing may obfuscate identity, intentionally or not. Indeed, it may even function to contain and essentialise.

The literal power of clothing to restrict new Indian girls is particularly evident in the motif of the sari, with which many girl characters, like Sunita, have a vacillating relationship. Similarly, in *Neela: Victory Song* (2002) by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, a work of historical fiction portraying one girl's contributions to the independence struggle, Neela feels ambivalent about wearing a sari. Neela knows that she is "normally . . . considered too young to wear a sari," but she is allowed to wear one for the special occasion of her sister's wedding, which could be seen as a kind of rehearsal for her own initiation into adulthood (9). Neela is greatly pleased by her adult appearance: she believes that the sari makes her "look at least fifteen," concluding that "it was worth being pinched and prodded for half an hour" (24). She laps up praise over her appearance, feeling "pleased" when her mother calls her "beautiful" (26). Neela recognises that by donning womanly apparel, adopting ladylike behaviour, and acting according to a script of traditionally feminine behavioural expectations, she can gain a rare reward—her mother's approval. This is unusual, and it prompts Neela to "[vow] she'd be on her best behaviour the rest of the evening" (26).

Her clothing and her behaviour together perform her mature Indian femininity and earn Neela the right to sit "among the women guests in the clearing by the side of the house, where the wedding was taking place" (27). The experience both excites her and leads her to recognise the transformative power of clothing to make her a woman temporarily. However, she is not convinced that womanhood is wholly desirable, which is not surprising as it requires her to be attractive and to act within a narrow, prescriptive behavioural code. Once she dons the sari, she loses access to syncretic girlhood.

This loss is highlighted when even while she enjoys wearing the sari, Neela resents the physical restriction it enforces. She objects to the fact that wearing a sari "would put an end to tree climbing and swimming across the pond" (9). She recognises that "[t]omorrow she would be happy enough to get back to her frocks and skirts, to rescuing kites and splashing around with Budhi in the pond" (24–25). She is disgruntled by how physically hampering the sari is: "her feet kept getting caught in the pleats of the sari," and wonders how women "manage" to wear them, fearing that it will take "all night just to walk down the corridor" (25). Momentarily slipping from her determination to act in a ladylike manner, "Neela glanced around quickly and then lifted the sari to her knees" (25). She is acutely aware of the power of clothing both to liberate and to restrict. After the wedding, Neela discards the sari in favour of less restrictive clothing, later going on to contribute to the freedom movement.

Clearly, Indian women writers are not wholly celebratory of the role of clothing in their portrayals of girl characters. Indeed, in some texts, women writers

delineate the binding qualities of clothing. I have so far been discussing the role of clothing as manipulated consciously by new Indian girls as part of their identity-shaping negotiations, particularly when they use clothing to present a particular identity within the public sphere. In this, I imply a large degree of control. However, there are other situations in which girls have little or no control over their clothing. In specific contexts, they are socially obligated to wear clothing that equally dramatically shapes the way others perceive them; in these cases, the girls feel that their identities are being dictated.

A particularly strong example of how restrictive and controlling clothing can be lies at the heart of *Keeping Corner*. When Leela becomes a child widow, she is forced to give up her colourful clothing and is allowed only to wear a *chidri*—a plain brown sari. Leela understands that this new attire will signal her identity to others: "With a bald head, brownish chidri, and no jewelry, I looked like an ugly doll made from mud. . . . People would look at me and see a widow" (Sheth 202). For the first time, she recognises that clothing does not "always reflect" who people are, comparing Gandhi's decision to wear a simple dhoti with her own obligation to wear a chidri (95).

Other women in *Keeping Corner* also realise how difficult it is for twelve-year-old Leela to give up her pretty, colourful clothing. When her teacher Saviben continues Leela's education at home during Leela's year of "keeping corner," she offers two sources of aid that are textually positioned as equally helpful to the child widow. First, Saviben offers Leela the opportunity to remain intellectually engaged, which she promises may eventually lead to a career. Second, Saviben offers emotional succour when she provides unexpected relief by realising that Leela misses varied feminine clothing. She offers to play a game with Leela: "Let's pretend that all the saris I wear are yours. . . . Tell me what color sari I should wear next time?" (99). Leela enjoys the game thoroughly: "For a while at least, the green of the monsoon earth or the purple of jamboo fruit covered me. While I studied, I pretended I wasn't a widow" (99). Leela's education is the one key that allows her to escape "stay[ing] in Jamlee for the rest of my life" and "be[ing] known as a child widow, bearer of bad luck, shunned from celebration, banished to a corner for the rest of my days" (244–245). Her teacher, with her family's blessing and Leela's own dedication to the task, provides this key. However, in the short term, the game she devises with her saris allows Leela an equally necessary emotional escape. Simply pretending that Saviben's saris are hers allows Leela some joy and temporary access to an identity that is separate from her widowhood.

Throughout these texts, women writers use clothing to show how new Indian girls' actions and identities can be restricted and/or liberated. Sociologist Ruth Rubinstein draws a similar conclusion, discussing changes in the fabric and design of girls' clothing in the west from the 1960s through the 1990s, which "made it possible for girls to choose an identity they wanted and to be free to act accordingly," including the possibility to "engage" in physical activity: these changes allowed girls "to negotiate a less prescribed

character . . . in social life" (223). In the novels as in Rubenstein's commentary, there is no question as to which side of the binary is promoted as ideal: in every case, agency, empowerment, freedom, and action are foregrounded as desirable. Indian women writers imagine girl characters with the right and the ability to negotiate their own cultural and gendered (and even professional) identites. When this ability to act is threatened, one of the tools girls are imagined to have at their disposal is clothing. On the other hand, clothing itself is also implicated in restriction of possibilities, as the case of the sari demonstrates.

Clearly, although syncretic girlhood is imagined as a state of power, it is also problematically narrow in that prettiness and femininity seem to be central components of being a girl: these qualities are also often conveyed through clothing. New Indian girls are prohibited from radically experimenting with their gender, a restriction often focused through clothing. Even Sheila's sister in *The Roller Birds of Rampur* is shown as problematic when she steps outside of the norms of conventional dress; although her clothing is to some degree feminine in that she wears a skirt and jewellery, it is still dismaying in colour and style. The occasional female character who does challenge feminised gender expectations of clothing is regarded as freakish and in need of reform.

A particularly telling example of this reform is the androgynous character Kiran in *Bhangra Babes* (2005) by Narinder Dhami. Significantly, the opening scene of this novel shows the Dhillon sisters waxing their legs and polishing their fingernails pink, presumably to increase their femininity and attractiveness. The narrative, which focuses on their aunt's impending wedding, frequently utilises clothing to demonstrate the states of girlhood which are culturally sanctioned along with those which are designated problematic. In contrast to the Dhillon girls—the most popular girls in school—who wear skirts with their school uniforms, designer label clothing (including skirts and dresses) at home and in public, and traditional Indian clothing at events such as Indian weddings, Kiran dresses in an androgynous style. As a result, her appearance is problematic and distasteful.

For example, when Amber first meets this newcomer to her neighbourhood, she seems barely able to recognise Kiran as female, due to her body, which is like "a hulking great Neanderthal" with "broad shoulders," her short hair, and her "combat trousers," all of which make it "difficult to tell" that she is a girl (Dhami 16). Kiran is positioned as an antagonist throughout much of the narrative, and it seems that her performance of a gendered identity that departs too far from girlhood, even a syncretic girlhood, is the problem: she is not easily enough recognisable as a girl. Although her social behaviour proves gruff and aggressive, which may be considered masculine (it is later revealed to be due to the shock of her father's recent death), her clothing provides the initial justification for her social ostracisation, as it signifies her lack of femininity, which is further highlighted by the fact that she "isn't pretty" (141).

Such a state of girlhood is unacceptable, and it must be changed: accordingly, at the end of *Bhangra Babes*, Kiran attends Auntie's wedding looking "pretty and feminine for once, in a light green suit, with a white flower in her hair" (175). By this point she has also become friends with the Dhillons and acts in a pro-social manner: she has transformed herself into an acceptable syncretic new Indian girl, a role signaled by her new clothing.

A similar transformation is highlighted at the end of *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, when Sunita and her friends enjoy being dressed up in saris by Sunita's grandmother. This scene further supports the message that new Indian girls must actually operate within strict gender parameters. Sunita's earlier rejection of herself as an Indian girl, particularly one who refuses to wear a sari, has been superseded by her syncretic Indian girlhood. Through the use of clothing, Sunita and her friends are shown as socially acceptable in the novel's conclusion:

> One by one, the girls stood patiently as she draped, pleated, and tucked the long pieces of silk around them. Then she opened another box, and they gasped at the gold and jewels that sparkled inside. . . . They draped themselves with bangles, necklaces, and earrings, and then trooped into Mom's room to take turns admiring themselves in the full-length mirror. (Perkins 175)

The girls' behaviour is exemplary in that they all allow themselves to be construed as feminine, status which is conferred on them by an elder (and they simultaneously show respect for Indian culture). In contrast, Kiran's initial lack of femininity, expressed through her more masculine, western clothing, position her as socially unacceptable—she is truly neither Indian nor feminine enough to be acceptable. New Indian girls are only celebrated if they act within a certain prescribed set of gender expectations: there is a limit to syncretic girlhood, and Kiran is that limit. She cannot be allowed to remain androgynous and unattractive, and so she is transformed into a syncretic Indian girl, an identity expressed primarily through her clothing.

A tool of female power, clothing can provide a way forward into economic and emotional prosperity. In this sense it is far from superficial but rather enables the capacity for dramatic transformation. In a different yet equally dramatic way, Danita in *Monsoon Summer* also capitalises on the liberating potential of clothing. By far the character who most obviously embodies the idea that clothing can change one's life and one's identity, Danita is a low-caste orphan, the eldest of three sisters of whom she is passionately protective. In order to ensure their future security, Danita is willing to marry a much older, ill-suited husband in an arranged marriage, although this is not the path she would choose. Instead, she would prefer to develop her skills as a clothing designer and work toward supporting herself financially by selling her designs. Danita has been experimenting with design without professional, emotional,

or financial support, but as soon as Jasmine observes her garments, things begin to change. Jasmine recognises the clothing's potential: "This stuff was beautiful. 'With products like these, Danita, you'd be crazy not to go for it'" (Perkins 166). Indeed, in another transformation, it is one of Danita's designs that first enables Jasmine to feel feminine, attractive, and Indian:

> I turned to face the mirror. A tall girl with shoulder-length hair stared back at me. She was wearing a purple *salwar kameez* covered with small, starry flowers.
>
> I blinked. For a second, in the graceful, flowing lines of the Indian outfit, this girl looked elegant. . . . For the first time in my life, I saw myself through Indian eyes, and I actually liked what I saw. (177)

This moment is pivotal for Jasmine, as she dramatically reconceptualises her identity as a result. It also further spurs her determination to help Danita succeed as a designer, based on the power of her designs.

Whereas the designs aid Jasmine emotionally, for Danita they effect financial transformation. Jasmine enables Danita to make her dream a reality by first encouraging her work and then by (anonymously) arranging a loan so that Danita can start up her design business. Thus, her economic stability is granted, and she is spared the arranged marriage. In this portrayal, clothing is elevated to an even more powerful role. Readers are invited to understand that beyond simply informing or symbolically performing a gendered identity, clothing can truly transform girls' and women's identities—and lives—in a multitude of profound and lasting ways.

Even while they showcase the liberating power of apparel, Indian women writers remind readers that clothing ultimately functions as a mark of social acceptability and perpetuates hegemonic power structures, particularly those of gender and class. In so doing, it functions to contain and limit syncretic girlhood, acting as a restraint. Thus, these novels imagine what it could mean to be a new Indian girl with a syncretic gender identity, as they portray a multitude of girl characters performing variations of this identity through their bodies, voices, and apparel. However, the many checks at work on a fully reimagined state of girlhood function as valuable reminders that the texts are ultimately prescriptive—powerful agents that coerce readers into perceiving Indian girlhood in certain ways.

Indeed, "possibilities for transformation are always constrained by the restricting nature of the dominant constructions based on gender, class," and other factors (Thapan 10). As Jeeta's mother reminds her, "We womenfolk have our reputations to protect," (Sheth, *Koyal Dark* 40), drawing attention to the heavy cultural burden Indian girls and women bear. New Indian girlhood is most often textually imagined as a state of empowerment, yet this empowerment is restricted to girls who embody mainstream middle-class attractiveness and function to benefit their nation or communities. These girls expand

the boundaries of traditional Indian girlhood but do not revolutionise it. Syncretic girlhood is less an individual pursuit than it may initially appear. Rather, it is an imagined state which postions girls effectively to contribute to larger societal needs while maintaining their roles as bearers of culture and tradition in a new context.

Conclusion
Old and New Boundaries

> "What is lovely about [the story]? . . . Savitri is supposed to be the ideal Hindu woman—so devoted to her husband that she follows Yama [the God of Death]. And for what? Just to have the pleasure of serving her husband again." Vandana seemed almost angry, even though she tried to smile.
>
> "Vandana, it's only a story," Sharmila said.
>
> (**Sreenivasan 69.** *Aruna's Journeys*. **2003.**)

> Revolution through children's literature continues, for how can postcolonial cultures achieve cultural identity for following generations but through the minds of children? The interaction of imagination . . . with the real allows for an emergence of new positions.
>
> (**Webb 87**)

There is an old expression about India, often repeated with a wry shrug by Indians describing their country: "whatever statement you make about India, the opposite is also true" (Prasad xv). It is difficult to discern whether this expression reflects centuries-old Orientalist attitudes, now perhaps internalised by Indians, or whether it simply indicates the nation's impressive diversity. Either way, it is not surprising that Rajini Srikanth has described diasporic South Asian literature as "large with paradoxes" (246). One might wonder how it could be otherwise, particularly when bearing in mind that India is geographically massive, home to almost a billion people who speak dozens of languages and are shaped by a multitude of religious, class, and caste affiliations, and that the millions of Indians living in the west are further influenced by the varying legislative and cultural zeitgeists of their adopted countries. What chance do contemporary Indian children's authors have of

creating veracity or avoiding paradoxes, particularly within the generally simplified genre conventions usually associated with children's literature?

I can answer this question only tentatively, and only in relation to the novels within this corpus: their chances are slim, despite a determined effort to permeate the novels with content that accurately conveys a sense that they are Indian. According to Peter Hollindale in *Ideology and the Children's Book* (1988), this lack of veracity is not problematic; rather, "[i]t is in [the writer's] power (and may be his *duty*) to recommend an improved world, reflecting not what is but what he hopes it might be" (15, emphasis mine). By this reasoning, then, these Indian children's writers have done their duty, a concept that dovetails smoothly with their textual emphasis on duty. In particular, contemporary Indian women writers for children have been extremely dutiful in their creation of the empowered new Indian girl, an imagined construct that defies and redefines traditional boundaries of Indian girlhood according to a liberal feminist value system. As I have discussed, however, the new Indian girl is flawed, not only in that she is situated solely in the middle and upper classes, but also in that there are rigid parameters restricting her apparent freedom and power. This fissure is significant in relation to Hollindale's understanding of children's literature, as it positions the arena of contention in what, precisely, children's writers' "hopes" are, and whom they serve.

Therefore, while my approach to contemporary English-language Indian children's novels is not as contradictory as to imply that the inverse of any statement I make is equally valid, one of my central tasks has been to uncover and explore the variety of ideological paradoxes embedded within these texts and their relationships with power, realism, and aspiration. Accordingly, I have argued broadly that while these novels vividly imagine positive social transformation through portrayals of empowered Indian children on the one hand, the aspirations of the texts are, on the other hand, those of the hegemonic group and are therefore restricted to what will best serve their middle-class, upper-caste goals—in both national and transnational contexts. This is a by-product of the circumstances of composition, as I established in Chapter 1, the results of which include a prescriptive portrayal of Indian girlhood, portrayals of national unity and multicultural harmony that appear at least superficially diverse but actually uphold existing sociopolitical hierarchies, and essentialised portrayals of Indianness.

Although I have discussed issues of power and ideology in relation to contemporary developments in Indian children's literature, this content is in no way new. On the contrary, it has existed for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years, since the composition of the *Panchatantra*.[1] As Amit Dasgupta notes in relation to the power of story in Indian culture, "Every story in *The Panchatantra Tales* . . . helped the child assimilate the societal norms and the acceptable code of conduct and behavior" (2). This foundational text seems to have set the tone for later Indian children's literature. Continuing in this vein, the contemporary, English-language children's novels in this corpus act, in

a similar manner, as a means to inculcate in child readers a hegemonic ideology. Most specifically, these are attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors that support a hegemonic vision of what it means to be a modern Indian in both India and the west.

The creators of these texts are aware of their duty to carry forward the tradition begun with the *Panchatantra* and recognise their responsibility in this campaign. Their awareness is implicit in an abundance of commentary about Indian children's literature, much of which repeats some variation of the following seemingly innocuous statment: "writers and illustrators . . . should try . . . to promote values through our work" (Mohanty, Jagnath 68). In this context, the source of power becomes which values are promoted, and whom these support.

Thus, while the novels in this corpus apparently invite child readers to imagine new possibilities that redefine participation in national aspirations, bicultural identity, and traditional approaches to gender, they also seek to contain these readers within the parameters of normalcy they inscribe. As a result, they often replace prescriptive traditional cultural norms with prescriptive contemporary cultural norms. Content and cultural values may be different than they were in the *Panchatantra*, but the method remains the same. In effect, the *Panchatantra*'s containing and coercive approach to story maintains a stronghold on contemporary English-language children's literature published in India, where, tellingly, "even today story books based on the *Panchatantra* are best sellers" (Jafa, "The National Seminar"13), as well as in the diaspora in the also didactic realm of multicultural children's literature.

Premised on an understanding of child readers as passive receptors of ideology, such a well-established approach to children's literature is unlikely to change, and particularly not where it has been entrenched for as long as it has in India. If the method will not change, then it becomes crucial to focus on the content—as I have here. In a similar vein, Mohini Rao makes an important point in her overview of "Children's Books in India" (1995):

> Authors in English are experimenting with new ideas and themes keeping the modern child's needs and expectations in mind. They seem to be perfectly at home writing about the upper middle class child but they do not succeed in striking the right note or creating the right ambience when dealing with characters from the poorer class. But that does not diminish the importance of their contribution. (72)

Indeed it does not, particularly in the postcolonial context. While I have been adamant about the problems associated with English-language children's novels from India, it is also essential to celebrate the fact that Indians have clearly established their own English-language print literature for youth—an important task, as both Rao's statement and the epigraph from Jean Webb affirm. Similarly, the emerging works of diasporic Indian children's authors

are valuable contributions to the field of western multicultural children's literature because they trumpet previously silent voices, despite the fact that they portray middle-class protagonists almost exclusively and that they may rely on essentialised or exoticised portrayals. Ideally, criticism such as Rao's and mine will encourage further, more nuanced proliferation from Indian authors in both India and the west.

It is as crucial for these writers to continue producing work as it is for them to address the sociopolitical power imbalances to which I have called attention in their work. They have made a strong beginning, one that establishes a valuable foundation from which to proceed. In particular, the presence of aspiration and hope in these novels is of the utmost importance, and it is essential to acknowledge the high value of their optimism, although I have also questioned its costs. Trites contends that "[o]ne of the most important functions of children's literature is to depict children who enact the agency that children in real life may not have" (*Waking Sleeping Beauty* 29). I agree with Trites: according to her premise, Indian children's authors have, in this way, too, done their duty. Their portrayals could begin to inspire social transformation if readers internalise and adopt the textual strategies portrayed in the novels, as they are invited to do.

However, now that Indian children's writers have begun to reimagine Indian girlhood, nation-building, and cultural identity, they must further expand the boundaries of these categories. In doing so, they would do well to remember the words of one of the founders of contemporary Indian society, Jawaharlal Nehru, who proclaimed the year India gained its independence that "the future is going to be what millions of young men and women want it to be" and therefore urged Indians to avoid "narrowness and intolerance and insensitiveness and lack of awareness" (*Essential Writings* 44). If Indian children's authors in both India and the diaspora can take up Nehru's advice, they will succeed in doing their duty. Until a revolution occurs that gives real children as much power as their fictional counterparts are granted, this is the best that children's writers can hope to do.

Appendix

Table A.1 Statistical Breakdown of Sample Books

Qualities of Sample Novels	**Total**	**India**	**Diaspora**
Number of Novels	101	60	41
Number of Authors	55	38	17
Female Authors	46	31	15
Female Protagonist/Central Characters	46	19	27
Genre[1]			
Social Realism	43	14	29
Historical Fiction	12	7	5
Fantasy	20	13	7
Adventure-mystery	20	20	0
School story	4	4	0
Animal story	2	2	0
Date of Publication			
1988–1993	10	4	6
1994–1999	20	17	3
2000–2005	44	24	20
2006–2008	27	15	12
Place of Publication			
India	60		
Canada	3		
United Kingdom	18		
United States	20		

[1]Note that genre designations provide only a rough guideline; many novels fall into several genres, but I have categorized them according to the dominant one.

Notes

Introduction

1 See Appendix for the full list of these novels and a table delineating some of their qualities.
2 In keeping with postcolonial critics, I do not capitalise the terms "west" or "western."
3 Note that several novels from India are publications originally released in the late 1970s or early 1980s which have been re-issued recently in omnibus form (original publication dates are absent from several of these new publications). My decision to include these texts is based on the conclusion that their re-issue reflects perceived cultural currency or relevance.
4 *Desi* is a Hindi term that means "from my country" and is used as a self-referential term by members of the South Asian diaspora.
5 Besides India these are Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
6 There are exceptions to this position: for example, Nilima Sinha argues for topics such as "religious fundamentalism" to be treated with increased "frankness" and "urgency" in Indian children's literature ("International Understanding" 14).
7 With 26 published titles, Rai is the third most prolific of all diasporic Indian children's authors. This is a particularly impressive accomplishment given that his first book, *(un)arranged marriage*, was published in 2001. Narinder Dhami, whose first children's book, *Cat's Eyes* was published in 1993, is most prolific: she has produced 62 published titles. Jamila Gavin, whose first children's book, *The Orange Tree* was published in 1980, is second: she has produced 42 published titles.
8 In *The Books for Keeps Guide to Children's Books for a Multi-Cultural Society* (1985), Gavin explains that after becoming dismayed by the prevalence of white child characters in British children's literature, she became determined to provide portrayals of "coloured children taking a major role" (32).

Chapter One

1 Note that parenthetical citations in the epigraphs follow standard MLA format except where it seems necessary to provide further contextualising information such as date of publication.

2 For example, see Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1983).

3 Srinivasan notes that the development of Indian children's literature took earliest and strongest root in Bengal, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century (31). Development of Indian children's literature was uneven in various regions and languages; the situation in Bengal was exceptional.

4 Other critics object to a linguistic situation that, because it privileges English, potentially threatens established Indian languages, both Hindi and regional.

5 There are 13 such authors listed in the United States (as opposed to 82 with clearly Anglo-Celtic names) and 4 in the United Kingdom (as opposed to 17 Anglo-Celtic). Although this information does not account for the possibility of name changes, for example due to marriage, it does seem to indicate a specific pattern of production.

6 Srinivasan claims that Mukerji was the first Indian-English children's author (33).

7 This widely used term describes cultures outside of the dominant Anglo-European, middle-class, heteronormative, able-bodied cultural hegemony in the English-speaking west.

8 Unless otherwise noted, all italics or emphasis in quotations are original.

9 For example, one study shows that in children's literature in the United States, "Asian Indians" are underrepresented. In the article "Reimagining a Pluralistic Society through Children's Fiction about Asian Pacific Americans, 1990–1999," Shwu-yi Leu concludes that out of a total of 156 works of children's fiction about Asian Pacific Americans published in this period, only 4 focus on Indians, whereas 56 focus on Chinese, 29 focus on Japanese, and 29 focus on Koreans.

Chapter Two

1 See *Children's Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s* (1994) by Kimberley Reynolds for a succinct outline and explanation of this relationship.

2 Due to the unfamiliarity of most authors and titles, where necessary I provide reminders of authors and publication dates, especially when the initial reference to a source occurred in a previous chapter.

3 Mohini Rao has identified the presence of new Indian women characters in Indian children's literature (68).

4 See hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984).

5 Deshpande does not delineate particular feminist theoretical positions in her discussion.

6 Indira Gandhi was not related to Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi, but she was Nehru's daughter. She was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards in 1984 as a result of widespread Sikh opposition to her policy decisions around "Operation Blue Star."
7 There are notable exceptions to this trend, particularly in the matriarchal systems in Kerala, as well as some tribal groups.
8 See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982).

Chapter Three

1 Abdul Kalam was president from 2002 through 2007. It is perhaps ironic, considering the ideology he communicates to children, that Adbul Kalam's most notable contribution to Indian scientific development was his work in nuclear arms development, specifically ballistic missiles.
2 This text is a children's version of Abdul Kalam's *India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium* (2000).
3 I use the term "communal" frequently in this book. In the South Asian context, this is a specific term that "primarily perceives Indian society as constituted of a number of religious communities. Communalism in the Indian sense, therefore, is a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for an ideology. It then demands political allegiance to a religious community and supports a programme of political action designed to further the interests of that religious community" (Thapar 209).
4 Although their philosophies in some ways overlapped on this point, in many ways Gandhi and Nehru had different, even conflicting aspirations for India. Whereas Gandhi was forward-thinking on many issues, he envisioned a more traditional, village-oriented society as ideal for India. On the other hand, Nehru promoted a modern, scientific, industrialised society as ideal.
5 Overcoming intense racism is rarely the focus of these texts. Notable exceptions are the works of Bali Rai and *Coloured Pictures* (1991) by Himani Bannerji.

Chapter Four

1 These children are sometimes portrayed at home in New Delhi or Mumbai, but in many novels they are traveling or on holiday in other areas of India, where they interact with locals.
2 See *Secularism and Its Critics* (1998), edited by Rajeev Bhargava.
3 A further shortcoming of Indian secularism is that it makes little space for the real inequalities perpetuated by caste; indeed, a liberal secular India accommodates middle-class, upper-caste Indians but creates a "non-availability" for "caste as a category for critical reflection" (Dhareshwar 115).

4 Anita Mannur similarly argues in "'The Glorious Heritage of India': Notes on the Politics of Amar Chitra Katha" (2000), that the popular Indian children's comic books, Amar Chitra Katha, are Hinducentric.
5 The anti-nationalist implications of this endeavour are obvious and signal the crucial role that export played during the colonial period.
6 For example, Gandhi was convinced that "courage was one of the highest human virtues and the Hindus had become woefully deficient of it," lamenting the lack of physical, intellectual, and moral courage in Indians and encouraging them to cultivate it (Parekh 46).
7 I discuss the influence of Enid Blyton on contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five

1 In fact, Srinivasan's recent survey of four hundred urban, middle-class Indian children's reading habits revealed that they prefer British children's authors to Indian children's authors (140).
2 I first developed this argument in the article "Mother's Milk: The Politics of Food in English-Language South Asian Children's Novels" (2008).
3 This structure is inverted in Bali Rai's *(un)arranged marriage* (2001), in which India is positioned as a kind of prison.

Chapter Six

1 The opposite is true of Sujata, who in *Coloured Pictures* (Bannerji 1991) complains that her teachers "think we are different and come from other places, but now we should forget all that and be the same as the others" and wishes they would ask "about what [religious holidays] we celebrate" (25). Unlike Tara, who is incensed when her teacher asks her about India, Sujata is thrilled when one teacher asks her "to do a big project on India" because he "wants to know more about our culture" (26).
2 I note that these texts are British, but I am not implying that these characters' experience is particularly British, as there is no way to discern from such a minute sample of texts whether the scenarios portrayed can be interpreted as representative patterns of "typical" diasporic experiences in any national context, if these can even be said to exist in reality.
3 It is significant that in both of these examples, fashion is the signifier of Indianness, symbolizing Indian culture for the protagonists. Whereas this may perpetuate an essentialised portrayal, it is a widely used pattern in the diasporic texts. I discuss the use of clothing more deeply in relation to gender identity in Chapter 7.

Chapter Seven

1 Manny and others of Bali Rai's boy characters also follow this path; however, my focus is on girlhood, as this state is of central concern in the corpus.
2 A good indication of this is that in the entire corpus there are very few physical assaults and attempted sexual assaults on girls: these occur only in rare and exceptional circumstances.
3 Rai vigorously resists the gendering of this binary in *(un)arranged marriage,* a novel that demonstrates the degree to which boys can also be implicated in fulfilling traditional cultural roles.
4 In Perkins's *Monsoon Summer*, Danita's use of clothing as a springboard to economic stability and the involvement of a small community of women invested in helping her to do so certainly portrays another level, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Conclusion

1 The *Panchatantra's* date of origin is disputed by scholars.

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